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BY F. C. MILFORD.

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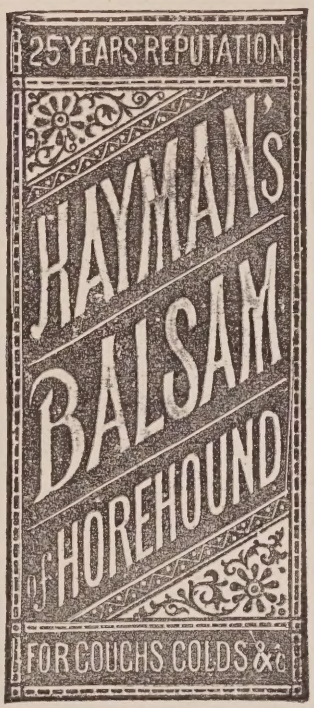
Fred C. Milford has not yet acquired a reputation of sufficient importance to admit of his appearing in biographical dictionaries. He is a writer of the Sensational school. The scene of the novel is partly in America and partly in this country.

IN CRIME'S DISGUISE.



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A Novel.

BY

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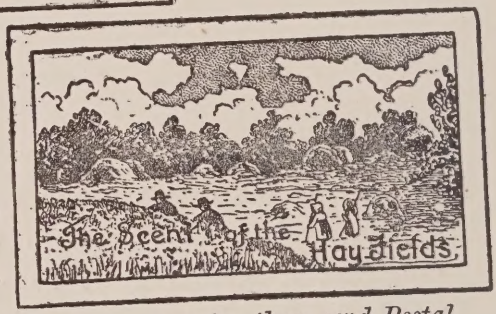

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IN CRIME'S DISGUISE.

PART I.—THE CRIME.—1875.

CHAPTER I.

THE SUPREME COUNCIL OF THE N—— BROTHERHOOD.

It is a boisterous, wet, March afternoon in New York, and the bitter east wind howls and whistles along the half-deserted streets, blurring the window-panes with the driving rain, which every recurring gust hurls pattering against the glass. Now the gale rises into a weird shriek of fury, and then settles down a moment later into a dreary wail until the next fierce squall comes sweeping wildly by.

Uninviting, however, as the aspect of things out of doors may be, I must ask you, gentle reader, to take me by the hand, and induing yourself with the legendary cap of invisibility, of which every right-minded author invariably carries a couple in his pocket for your use and his own, accompany me to the opening scene of our story.

Lying some twenty or thirty yards back from the low, railing-topped wall that skirts one of the less frequented suburban thoroughfares, you may see, through the trees and shrubs that intervene between it and the roadway, an old, square-built, two-storied house, whose only claim to picturesqueness lies in its somewhat dilapidated appearance. It is surrounded by an air of uncanny mystery, and you might vainly question ninety-nine out of a hundred passers-by without eliciting any information as to its occupants or the uses to which it is put. The hundredth, perhaps a trifle better posted up than his fellows in the gossip of the neighbourhood, might, however, minister to your curiosity by telling you that for some years it has been the quarters of a little club of eccentrics calling themselves the *Ignoti*. If he is of a talkative disposition, he might even launch out into queer stories of the curious customs and rules which are supposed to be observed by its few members; how it is reported that a solemn silence is said to characterise their unfrequent meetings; how it is rumoured that by one uninfringible regulation they are never permitted to look on each other's features in their sequestered club-house, but eat, drink, and play their gloomy games of billiards or whist, with masked faces; how

they are so pledged to inviolable secrecy with regard to the fact of their membership, that in no case has the identity of any of their little party ever been revealed to the outside world, although they are supposed to number among them more than one of the leaders of New York society. With these and many other equally curious rumours that have reached his ears your informant might regale you, were you not in a position to dispense with his services, thanks to your fairy headgear, which will enable us to make a "personally-conducted tour" of the premises, and judge for ourselves.

We pass, in our disembodied condition, through the carefully-locked gate in the street wall, and find ourselves in a narrow strip of neglected garden, overgrown with a few stunted trees, and a mass of tangled bushes, through which a badly-kept gravel path leads up to the front door of the house. Through the windows on each side of the entrance you can discern the interiors of a comfortably-furnished reading-room and an apartment evidently designed for the consumption of nicotine, both, however, void of occupants, and somehow bearing that indescribable aspect which speaks of infrequent use. The hat and coat racks in the hall are empty, and the only sign of life on the ground

floor so far is the passing glimpse of an old woman, clad in a by no means too clean print dress, crossing the passage at the back of the house, where the domestic offices are evidently situated.

Hark! Surely there is the subdued sound of voices upstairs. Let us try the next floor. Yes; there is evidently an animated discussion of some kind going on there, in that room to the right of the landing, but the wind and the rain outside effectually drown all but the mere inarticulate murmur which reaches our ears through the closed door.

Shall we enter and join the party? Yes? Well, just one word of caution before we do so. Keep that cap of invisibility tight on your head, my friend, or I warn you you will never come out of that room alive.

A plainly-furnished apartment enough, to which the presence of an iron safe in one corner imparts a somewhat office-like aspect. Five men are seated around a green baize-covered table, furnished in board-room fashion with foolscap, ink, and pens at regular intervals. One of those gossipy rumours of eccentricity is at all events not without foundation in fact, for every face is covered with a small black mask, which permits only the mouth and chin to be seen. Is

this a lunatic asylum into which we have strayed? you ask.

No, gentle reader, a far more dangerous place for any intruder than that. Neither is it a club of eccentrics—that is but a blind for the benefit of the curious. You are in the presence of perhaps the most powerful, secret, and impersonal body in America, or anywhere else—*the Supreme Council of the N—— Brotherhood.*

Those masks are no mere melodramatic insignia. They form part of a system of the most carefully-guarded secrecy the mind of man ever imagined, and which is so great a factor in the attainment of almost unlimited power by the directors of that extraordinary organisation, by rendering the betrayal of their identity an absolute impossibility. No subordinate officer of the Brotherhood has ever seen those faces uncovered in that house, where the business of the Society may have necessitated his attendance ; not even to each other in the execution of their duties have the features of the individual members of the Council ever been disclosed. Identification, except by name (and that only to a restricted extent even among themselves), is impossible. In the original scheme the absolute impersonality of the governing Council of the Brotherhood was the first essential of its

existence, and the methods of its selection, the rules that governed the conduct of its business, the inviolable secrecy with regard to its composition, all tended to the realisation of that ideal.

But it is not my intention to weary you with a detailed analysis of the constitution either of that wide reaching organisation, designated in these pages "the N—— Brotherhood," or of the mysterious body which holds the reins and controls its most trivial action. We are in the presence of the Supreme Council; let us listen to what is going on.

"I fancy we have threshed out the question before the Council this afternoon pretty exhaustively"—it is a long-bearded, broad-shouldered, powerful-looking personage at the head of the table, who is speaking—"and, as you, gentlemen, are aware, I am in favour of acquiescing in the suggestion of the chief Irish branch of the Brotherhood. The Dublin executive complain that this long continuance of mild measures is rapidly alienating the support of their outside sympathisers, a fact to which the deplorable decrease of supplies certainly bears ample testimony. They have, loyally enough, referred the matter to headquarters here, but unless action is taken under our *ægis*, I fear

it will be under local and unauthorised influence. Our colleagues, 'Number Two' and 'Number Five,' seem a little doubtful whether so drastic a measure as is contemplated may not do more harm than good; but I cannot see it. What we have to fear more than anything is stagnation in the political atmosphere, and our friends in Dublin should be the best judges of the step they suggest. You, 'Number Three,' have not favoured the Council with your views. Is there any fresh argument on one side or the other that you would care to adduce?"

The individual addressed—a tall, slight man, apparently, as well as the mask, which covers his features but allows a trim black moustache to escape beneath its lower edge, will permit us to judge, about thirty to thirty-five years of age, leans back in his chair and twists the pen he is holding between his nervous fingers. "I say 'yes' most emphatically to all 'Number One,' our worthy President, has proposed," he remarks. "There is only one suggestion I would offer, and that is that it should, in the interests of the Society, be made clear to the world at large that the deed is not the outcome of mere local enthusiasm in the Irish cause, but emanates from a much more cosmopolitan source. To that end, I think our agent should be selected

from one of the New York sections, in preference to any possible Dublin volunteer for the task."

"There I think you are unquestionably right," says the President. "That, of course, we can always manage. Well, if no one has any further remarks to offer, I will put the question to the vote formally. Gentlemen, it is unwise on such an occasion as this—no matter how great the precautions taken for secrecy may be—to reiterate in plain words the proposition now before the Supreme Council. You all know what it is. Let those in favour of its adoption raise their hands."

As we glance round the table, we see that every man of the masked party is holding his right hand aloft; some firmly enough, but one or two—notably "Number Five," who sits on the right of the President, and whose fingers are trembling with excitement and fear—with palpable signs of agitation. What can it be, then, this mysterious proposal which has so potent an effect upon their nerves?

The President counts their votes: "One, two, three, four, five! We are unanimous, then. Gentlemen, the Council's decree is *death!*"

There is a solemn pause while a man

might count a score, and "Number Five" is shaking like an aspen leaf. He fills himself a tumbler of water from a carafe on the table with difficulty, spilling part of its contents as he tries to lift the glass to his livid lips; but his companions appear to take no notice of his evident emotion.

"It will devolve on the officer of the week to prepare a list of suggested agents for the due execution of the Council's decree," resumes the President, at length, "and from among those names the final selection will be made by lot, as usual, at our meeting to-morrow afternoon. Who is the officer of the week?"

"I am afraid I am," answers the black-moustachioed individual who has formerly been addressed as "Number Three." "It is rather an invidious task and anything but a pleasant one." (There is a curious gleam observable, however, through the eye-holes in his mask, which seems somewhat to belie his words.) "I will do my best, gentlemen, with regard to this disagreeable duty, and try to pick out some with a hankering for a patriot-martyr's crown. The worst is that the necessity for secrecy precludes the possibility of sounding your men beforehand. However, as I say, I will do my best. I see the last month's reports and rolls of the New

York sections have been left here this morning. I will go through them carefully."

The President bows. "We will assemble here to-morrow at the same hour to settle all necessary details," he says. "Gentlemen, you understand? This meeting stands adjourned till half-past four to-morrow afternoon."

Then, one by one, at intervals of about a minute—so that each may have time to unmask below stairs and take his departure unseen by his comrades — the individual members of this ghastly crew disappear, leaving us alone with the officer of the week, who remains behind to consult the member-lists for his dread selection—for it is tolerably well apparent that assassination and nothing else is the contemplated measure for which some unhappy tool has now to be chosen.

For a good five minutes "Number Three" sits, leaning his head on his hand in profound thought; then he rises from his chair and begins pacing slowly up and down the room. "I've a great mind to put young Ffrench down for this job," he mutters to himself. "I'm told he's a dare-devil sort of fellow, though I've never set eyes on him yet. Absence doesn't always make the heart grow fonder, and, if he were out of the way, that pretty vixen of a wife of his might perhaps

feel more inclined to listen to reason. Gad! my lady snubbed me smartly enough this morning. However, let's have a look at the other sections." And he takes up a large official-looking envelope without any address on it, breaks the seal, and, extracting its contents, glances at them one by one. "Arbuthnot, Murphy—well, he might do," he goes on reflectively to himself. "Wildey—I don't know anything about him. Ah! Master Wilfred at the head of the ninth section? That's quick work for a few months of membership. He must have proved himself a useful man in a small way. The young fool is clever enough, to do him justice. He never quite cottoned to me from a lad. Thought I was after Madge's money, I suppose. He'll be thinking of matrimony himself soon, I shouldn't wonder; and then good-bye to the last chance of the second half of old Sullivan's money. I wish——"

He stops suddenly and sinks into a chair. "Good Lord!" he exclaims, "I never thought of *that*. Suppose——. No; damn it all! I can't do that. Let me think."

The man is actually shaking with excitement. "A clear one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in my pocket if anything were to happen to him," he goes on. "Great Scott! But it *is* a temptation. After all,

why not? Some one must be victimised. As well he as any one else; and the young fool is always gassing about his downtrodden country. Hang it! I wish the idea had never come into my brain."

He rises again and rings the bell. "Bring me some brandy," he says to the old woman who answers his summons—the same old woman we caught a glimpse of in the passage downstairs—and he resumes his walk up and down with feverish strides until she returns and places a decanter and a glass on the table. Then he pours out half a tumblerful of the fiery liquid and swallows it fiercely.

The draught seems to steady his nerves. "Absolutely no risk in the scheme," he continues to mutter; "absolutely none. Not a living soul among them all dreams for an instant that I am connected with the Society. How should they? No trace of the business can ever be brought home to me by any chance. And even if he chooses to disobey the decree—which is more than probable—the result will be the same; for disobedience to any decree of the Council means *death*. Why, if he bolted, I could kill two birds with one stone by arranging to have young Ffrench sent after him."

His mouth sets cruelly under his neat, black moustache, and he pours out and

swallows yet another dose of brandy to nerve his determination.

Then he sits down and begins playing curious tricks with little strips of paper. Is the man mad, or has the spirit flown to his head? Watch him closely and you will see a method in his madness.

He cuts a sheet of paper into half-a-dozen slips, marking one of them with a cross, and folds them identically. Then he takes his hat from beneath a chair and places it on the table. Now he gathers up all the slips apparently, and throws them into the hat, shaking them well up together. Finally, without looking, he draws a slip, seemingly at random, and opens it. *It is the one he has marked.* He is not yet contented with the extent of his dexterity, for he tries the trick again and yet again, always with the same result.

At last he rises with a little sardonic laugh. "Tolerably perfect, I think," he mutters. "I fancy I can give a pretty correct guess as to whom the lot will fall on to-morrow."

Then he collects the lists and reports on the table, locks them up carefully in the safe, puts on his overcoat and hat, listens for a moment to the howl and whistle of the wind outside, and walks downstairs and out into the storm.

The waning light deepens into gloom and

seems to people that chamber of secret crime with the unknown victims of many such another death-fraught conclave; the still rising gale shrieks and wails around the eaves and cornices of that guilty roof, as if in ghastly imitation of their long-forgotten death-cries; the driving raindrops beat and rattle more furiously than ever against the window-panes, as if the spirits of the murdered dead were claiming admittance to the place in which their doom has been decreed.

Let us shake the dust from off our feet and fly from this hideous home of cowardly crime and cold-blooded treachery.

CHAPTER II.

THE DECREE OF DEATH.

To remark that there is an "At Home" at Mrs. Dalrymple's is practically to say that a visit to her handsome drawing-rooms will introduce you into the presence of nearly every one worth looking at, or listening to, in New York society. Fair leaders of fashion, celebrated American beauties, statesmen, artists, authors, actors, and merchant princes, each and all form part of the heterogeneous and well-dressed crowd which is talking, laughing, gossiping, and flirting, in almost every available corner of the Dalrymples' spacious residence.

"So you've kept your promise, after all, Mr. Sullivan," said a pretty brunette, the daughter of the house, to a young fellow of two or three and twenty, whose broad-shouldered, lithe, active figure, curly fair hair, frank blue eyes, and well-formed, clean-cut features, with their merry boyish expression, decidedly entitled him to the designation of good-looking. "It is a disgraceful hour to make your appearance at a 'small-and-

early,' but better late than never, you know."

The young man laughed—and a pleasant, musical laugh it was. "I only got back from Boston a couple of hours ago," he said. "I remembered yesterday afternoon what an important engagement I had to keep to-night, Miss Dalrymple, and, consequently, here I am."

"Well, I suppose I must give you some little credit for your fidelity in keeping tryst, under the circumstances," rejoined the girl, with a tinge of delicate coquetry in the upward glance of a pair of sweet, dark eyes.

"There is not much credit in doing what you want to, after all," was the smiling reply. "Give me this dance as a set-off against an abominably cold journey—that would be something tangible, and more to the point."

"I am engaged to your brother-in-law." The young man's face fell. "*But*," the young lady went on, with just the faintest stress on that most important monosyllable in a woman's mouth, "I saw Mr. Atherton towed off to supper by a hungry-looking dowager, five minutes ago, and so I will even grant your presumptuous request. I wonder if you have forgotten how to waltz."

Judging from the graceful way in which this interesting young couple swept round the dancing-room, a moment later, in perfect unison of step, it really did not seem as if Mr. Sullivan had altogether forgotten the art in which he had the reputation of being tolerably proficient. Round and round they swung, the most accomplished and handsomest pair of dancers there; nor paused to take breath until the sweet, melodious strains of Waldteufel ceased.

"By-the-bye," said Miss Dalrymple, "mother and I were so delighted your sister was strong enough to come to-night. She has been an invalid so long. She told us this was the first dance she had been to for nearly a year."

"Madge here!" exclaimed the young man, with a glad look in his eyes, which showed that a lack of fraternal affection was not among his faults of character. "Well, that is a step in advance for her. I had no idea she was up to such a feat of strength. I did not see her as I passed through the rooms in search of you, Miss Dalrymple."

"She has evidently seen you, though," rejoined his partner, as a tall, tastefully-dressed, fair but very fragile-looking lady came towards them, "for here she comes to speak for herself. And here comes my *next*

infliction also," she added in an arch whisper, referring to a somewhat inane-looking specimen of the genus "dude," who approached to claim the next dance. "Good-bye, Mr. Sullivan; yes, it *was* a very pleasant waltz, if you will insist on the admission. You can come and see us to-morrow and tell us all about your Boston adventures, you know."

"Why, Wilfred! what an unexpected pleasure!" exclaimed his sister, Mrs. Atherton, as she took our young friend's arm, after exchanging a friendly smile with his late partner; and the pair moved off in the direction of a cosy little alcove, where a couple of low chairs spread out inviting arms. "Tom declared you had announced your intention of returning to-day; but as you did not even send me a line to say you would be back in New York to-night, I hardly fancied I should find you here. How have you enjoyed your Boston trip, my dear boy?"

"No end," was the reply. "I only got back two or three hours ago. But Madge, old girl, it is quite like old times seeing you at a dance again. Miss Dalrymple just told me you were here, but I could hardly believe her. Tell me all the news. How are you, and Tom, and that young nephew of his, and the pretty governess I caught a glimpse of

a month ago? Aldridge swore to me to-night that he was over head and ears in love with her. I expect you've found the men dropping in to afternoon tea in fine style, haven't you?" he added, laughing.

"You silly boy!" said his sister, with a merry smile. "You can tell Mr. Aldridge to preserve his superabundant affections for another object. The pretty governess has a husband already, and I'm thinking of having a placard slung round her neck: *Il est défendu d'y toucher*, though I fancy she could take care of herself should occasion arise. Oh, yes; we are all very flourishing at home; and I am ever so much stronger again, as you can see for yourself. I am so glad you had a pleasant visit to Boston. To tell you the truth, Wilfred, both Tom and I were getting very anxious about you before you went away."

"Anxious about me? A pretty subject for anxiety, I am," exclaimed her brother, incredulously. "Did you think I was sickening for measles, or 'housemaid's knee,' or what? I should like to know."

Mrs. Atherton laughed. "I cannot say we took either of those maladies into consideration," she said. "But, joking apart, I want to talk to you seriously, Wilfred; only you must promise me not to be angry."

"I'll promise anything you like, old girl," was the reply. "Fire away, and pitch into me at your sweet will, only remember that life is brief, and that I am rather looking forward to some supper. What is it you want me to do? Wear flannel next my skin, or strengthen my digestive organs with a course of bismuth lozenges? Come, out with it, Madge."

"Do be serious for a few minutes, dear old boy," said his sister, with a tone of anxiety in her voice that sobered young Sullivan at once. "The fact is, Wilfred, it is about the undesirability of some of your recent acquaintances and companions that I wanted to speak to you. I know so well the strength of your political feelings, your national aspirations—who should know all about them better than I?—and I do so dread that they may lead you into something you may bitterly regret hereafter. You have listened too eagerly to, and believed far too implicitly in, the arguments and assertions of men whose motives are, in the opinion of those who should know best, anything but above suspicion. Before you went to Boston, Tom told me that your name was becoming associated with those of certain members of the extreme Irish party, and that he had himself seen you in the company of one or

two men whose society is reputed to be distinctly dangerous, and likely to lead you into harm. You are so young and so impressionable; oh! my dear boy, I do implore you to be careful what ideas you take up, and how far you allow yourself to be led away. Ah! here is Tom himself," she added, as the curtained entrance to their little retreat was darkened by the approach of a third party who came up at this juncture.

The new-comer was a tall, well-built man, whose age might have been guessed as anything between thirty and forty, with smooth, glossy, black hair surmounting a dark, handsome, clever face. A carefully trimmed moustache with waxed and pointed ends, shaded but did not hide a powerful, straight-cut mouth. The chief point of peculiarity about his face lay in his eyes, which were in striking contrast with his raven hair and swarthy complexion. Of a light, steel-blue colour, there was something in their normal cold impenetrability which both fascinated and repelled the casual observer; while now and again a passing gleam of startling intensity would betray the fact that their surface-calm was but shallow and deceptive.

"Ah! Wilfred, old fellow, how are you?" exclaimed Mr. Thomas Atherton, shaking hands heartily enough with his young brother-

in-law. "Your trip has evidently done you no harm; you look as fit as a fiddle. I suppose you left the Boston belles in inconsolable grief over your departure? Well, we're glad enough to have you back again; upon my word, Madge and I have felt quite dull during your absence."

A close observer might have remarked a faint—a very faint—contraction of young Wilfred Sullivan's brows as the other gave vent to this cordial greeting, and might have argued from it that his sister's husband was perhaps not altogether a *persona grata* to that young gentleman. The expression was but a very transient one, however, and might, indeed, have been altogether undiscernible on a less frank and open countenance.

"I was just talking to Wilfred on the subject of those horrid men you spoke to me about, Tom," broke in Mrs. Atherton. "I am trying to persuade him that such acquaintances are dangerous in the extreme to any one's reputation. Come and help me to induce him to drop them before he is led into serious mischief."

"Madge is quite right, Wilfred," remarked the personage thus appealed to. "Such ultra rabid patriots as Murphy, Arbuthnot, and one or two others I have met you walking

with, are by no means the best companions for an ardent young Irish gentleman. You may believe a man who has knocked about in this deceitful old world some ten or fifteen years longer than you have, when he tells you that people with such very dubious political reputations as theirs are, are to be distrusted and avoided as much as possible by a young fellow of your age. You must not be annoyed with me for speaking so plainly, old chap. Your sister has been very anxious about it, and so have I. Take my advice, and cut the lot of them."

As he ceased speaking, Thomas Atherton turned away and looked out into the dancing room, as if to see that no other guests had been near enough to overhear his remarks. Perhaps, however, his movement may have been actuated by a desire to conceal from his hearer's observation a faint sardonic smile which, despite all his efforts, he seemed unable to restrain from creeping over his dark face. It had entirely disappeared, however, when, a moment later, he resumed his former position.

Young Sullivan remained silent for an instant or two, evidently struggling to repress the annoyance he felt at such a wholesale denunciation of his political associates. At last his face cleared again, and he put

his arm affectionately round his sister's shoulders.

"It is gratifying to feel one is the object of such interest to one's belongings," he said, with a pleasant little laugh; "and I am much obliged to you both for your well-meant warnings. I can't very well break altogether with the objects of your distrust; but I assure you, you need not alarm yourselves. I promise to be caution itself, and not to let my patriotism lead me into any unnecessary dangers. You may not altogether sympathise with all my views; but you may rely on it that I shall never be tempted into any action that may cause either of you to blush for our connection and relationship with each other. And now I'm going to hunt for some supper, for I've had no dinner, and feel more like a ravening wolf than an ordinary human being in evening clothes. I'll come and see you to-morrow, and have another look at the pretty governess, Madge. Good night, old girl." And kissing his sister affectionately, the young man shook hands once again with her husband and took his departure in quest of the supper-room.

"We'd better be off, Madge. This evening has been an unwonted exertion for you, and it is full time you were in bed and asleep," remarked Mr. Atherton, offering

his arm to his wife. "Come along, and get your wraps."

Half an hour later, as he lit a cigar and settled himself comfortably in front of his library fire for a final quiet smoke before retiring to rest, Thomas Atherton gave vent to a somewhat curious remark.

"I should like to see that young fool's face when he gets back to his rooms to-night," he said to himself, as he leant back in his chair and sent the tobacco-smoke curling in little blue rings up towards the ceiling.

* * * * *

Wilfred Sullivan's past history can be easily epitomised, without trespassing too heavily on the reader's forbearance. He and his sister, Mrs. Atherton, were orphans of good Irish parentage, born in New York, where, some five-and-twenty years previously, their father had taken refuge in his flight from the consequences of some hare-brained plot, which had for its aim and object a rising against the established government in his native land. There is little doubt that, had he chosen to do so, he could, years before his death, have returned to Ireland in perfect safety; but he preferred to consider himself in the light of a patriot-martyr, and to inveigh in unmeasured and utterly unjustifiable terms against what he was pleased to

designate "the tyrannical oppression of his downtrodden country, which had condemned him to a life-long exile."

It would be needless to say that, brought up in such an atmosphere, Wilfred had been permeated with utterly erroneous impressions with regard to the relations between Great Britain and Ireland; that every Hibernian hardship, however trivial, was magnified into a case of the most accursed cruelty; that every attempt on the part of the authorities to maintain the due observance of the laws of the land was construed into an act of atrocious despotism, until at last the lad, fired by horror and indignation at imaginary injustice, dreamt of nothing, sleeping or waking, but the emancipation of Ireland from the English yoke, and would readily have faced an honourable death (as he pictured it to himself) at the bayonet points of a ruthless soldiery, if only he could aid in its accomplishment.

All this may seem to us sufficiently absurd and melodramatic; but it must be remembered that youth is essentially imaginative and romantic, while poor Wilfred's early surroundings gave colour to the misrepresentations he so ingenuously believed in.

At the age of twenty-one our young friend was deprived, by the death of his father, of

that parental guidance which, sooth to say, had, while it lasted, been of a singularly injudicious nature, and of eminently mischievous tendency. With a mind still totally unformed, he found himself his own master with a moderate but sufficient income, and it was shortly afterwards that he made the fatal mistake of his life by joining a certain secret society in New York, which had for one of its ostensible objects the organisation of all available means, apart from cowardly and criminal outrage (on that point he had, as he thought, taken good care to assure himself), for the compassing of what has already been intimated was the dream of his misinformed youth. Nor, during the nine or ten months which had elapsed since he had taken the oath of fidelity, had anything occurred in the particular section to which he belonged to shake his entire belief in the solemn asseverations which he had elicited before he had bound himself to membership.

It was a fine, dry, starlit night, and as, after bidding adieu to his charming hostess, Wilfred Sullivan strolled through the still crowded streets in the direction of his rooms, his mind naturally dwelt on the warning entreaties of his sister and her husband. The doubt cast by those nearest and dearest

to him on the political and social reputations of some of the men with whom he had lately become associated annoyed the young Irishman more deeply than he had cared to show during that conversation at the Dalrymples.

"I suppose there is an instinctive tendency in the human mind," he said to himself, as he lit a cigar, "to think evil where evil is not; and if only enough mud is thrown some of it is sure to stick. The crediting of every outrage committed by irresponsible ruffianism to the score of such organisations as ours is sufficient to vilify all patriotic aspirations in the eyes of the ignorant. If Madge, and Tom too, could only know how the few months' experience I have gained enables me to laugh at the fables one hears in general circulation. Bah! Let people talk, and revel in their silly prejudices; what matters it to me as long as I know them to be so utterly mistaken?"

Poor lad!—for he was little more—his innocent belief was destined, ere daylight dawned, to a shock all the more terrible from its total unexpectedness; a shock which in its awful horror would obliterate such comparative trifles as his romantic patriotism with all its air-built castles and dreams of heroism.

As he entered his sitting-room and looked around in the half-light of the partly-turned-down lamp a glimmer of white caught his eye from the centre of the dark-cloth covered table in the middle of the room.

Was there no intuitive instinct of distrust to make him pause? No suspicion of the deadly trap to life and honour that lay there, showing up indistinctly in the gloom against its sombre-hued background?

Wilfred Sullivan turned up the lamp, and saw before him a letter, carefully sealed, and evidently delivered by hand, as it bore no stamp or postal marks. He broke the seal and glanced at the contents of that fatal missive, then with a hoarse, inarticulate cry of horror he sank into a chair beside him, and sat staring with terror-stricken eyes and white, ghastly face at the paper in his hand.

It was an intimation from the Supreme Council of the N—— Brotherhood—the Society to which he had with such foolish, trustful blindness pledged his boyish faith—to the effect that the assassination of the Irish Viceroy had been decreed, and that *his* hand had been chosen to strike the blow.

An hour—two hours passed; the roll of the traffic in the street outside grew fainter and fainter, and then died away into silence; the grey dawn came peeping through the

window curtains to replace the fading gleam of the dying lamp, and still the poor doomed wretch (for disobedience meant death) sat staring, staring at the Gorgon's head that had turned him into stone.

CHAPTER III.

IN MID-OCEAN.

THE scorching rays of a tropical sun at high noon were beating down with furnace-like heat upon the slowly heaving bosom of an oily sea, whose expanse of dull, leaden-hued waters stretched away in vast circular sweep to the sky-line of hazy blue—were beating down fiercely and relentlessly on the one object that broke the monotony of the restless watery waste and formed the "eye" of the dreary scene, a little open boat.

Small as she seemed, rising and falling sleepily on the long, glassy roll, while the loose sail idly flapped against the mast with every movement of the boat, she was yet big enough and to spare to contain all that was left of the good steamer *May Queen*, bound from San Francisco to Melbourne—two poor, haggard, half-clad wretches, the sole survivors of her hapless crew.

Truly their bitterest enemies could have wished them no worse fate than to lie as they lay there—one stretched at full length in the stern sheets, the other crouched up in the

bows and gazing listlessly over the gunwale down into the dull, dark depths below. The fate of their late comrades, now at rest beneath the cool, deep waters, must have seemed an enviable lot indeed compared with their own miserable condition, blistered by that scorching glare, tortured by hunger, racked by thirst, abandoned by hope. Bearded, gaunt, and hollow-eyed, they might have been twin brothers, from the common likeness wrought by misery and privation.

It was the old story so often, so disastrously repeated. The gallant, well found steamer, with its costly cargo and still more precious freight of human lives, with all their hopes, joys, ambitions, and sorrows, cleaving the trackless ocean in its untiring course; the foggy night through which the look-out strains his anxious eyes in vain to see a cable's length ahead; the sharp cry of terrified dismay, the sudden, soul-appalling shock, the hissing rush of the inpouring waves, the despairing wail that rises through the darkness as the doomed vessel sinks rapidly lower and lower in the water, the deafening crash of the exploding boilers, and then—silence.

Yes; there had been another terrible, annihilating collision at sea, and the two occupants of this frail craft alone survived of passengers and crew, to tell the tale. The

catastrophe had been even more complete and disastrous than usual in such cases; the ill-fated steamer had been struck amidships and absolutely cut in two. She had foundered almost instantly, and, in the dense fog that prevailed, every soul had perished except the wretched men whose present desperate plight would have moved the most callous to pity. They owed their safety—such as it was—to the fact of their being on deck at the moment of collision, the shock of which had hurled them into the water. It had been a calm night, and, after an exhausting struggle to keep themselves afloat, they had chanced in the darkness on one of the steamer's smaller boats, which, lying unsecured on deck after the execution of some trivial repairs, had, by a lucky accident, not gone down with the sinking vessel. They had clambered into her and bailed her out; and when the daylight dawned and the fog cleared, they were alone in that vast solitude.

A few days of hunger, thirst, and exposure to that terrible, relentless heat had wrought fearful havoc on the two unfortunate castaways, and in that poor emaciated, unkempt, forlorn wretch who lay stretched in the stern-sheets of the little craft—his weary, burning head upon his arm, sleeping the uneasy slumber of privation and exhaustion—the

reader would find considerable difficulty in recognising the athletic, upright figure and bright, handsome features of our young friend, Wilfred Sullivan.

And yet it was even so. The poor betrayed lad had not hesitated for a moment in the choice of evils to which he was committed. Sooner than lend his hand to a cold-blooded, cowardly scheme of assassination, even under the delusive guise of patriotism, he had braved the vengeance of the Brotherhood and fled from the terrible fate which he knew was involved in disobedience to the Council's decree.

Who shall tell what the unhappy fugitive had suffered in the never-ceasing terrors of that flight — that hourly, endless effort to baffle the secret pursuer who, he knew full well, must have been despatched upon his track to execute the doom he had incurred? The ever-recurring thought that this fellow-passenger in the cars, that fellow-guest at the hotel, might be the dreaded messenger of death; the start of fear at every casual foot-step behind him in the street; the broken slumbers haunted by hideous dreams; that fevered existence whose waking and sleeping hours seemed one long, terrible nightmare— who can paint these things in words that will convey any idea of the mental tortures of the

past two months to Wilfred Sullivan? Even when at last, safe on board the Australia-bound steamer, he had seen the land fade away on the distant horizon, and Hope began to reign once more within his weary heart, it seemed as if Fate had singled him out for fresh misfortune; one short week of rest and he was in worse plight than ever.

The poor fellow in the stern moaned and stirred in his sleep, attracting the attention of his companion, who raised himself and, sitting down on the bow thwart, chin in hand, remained motionless, watching his slumbering comrade at the other end of the boat. Presently the moans grew into disjointed mutterings, while the slightly parted eyelids showed a glistening line of white between their edges, the sleeper's thin hands and face twitched convulsively, and the cold sweat-beads of deadly fear gathered on his brow. His mind was travelling back again in dreams over the terrible experiences of his flight from New York.

"There it is again," he muttered. "Some one trying the door—no; all quiet outside. I mustn't sleep; they may be close behind. Where now? Steamer for Australia—take care no clue left. Hark! another step. Oh, God! no rest. Always hunted—hunted—hunted!"

The voice died away in a low wail of misery, and all was silent again, save for the never-ceasing ripple and splash of the water against the boat's planks. The man in the bow sat watching him intently.

"Poor devil!" he said to himself, "it must be an awful feeling, that—to feel you are doomed, and never to know whose hand is to be the one: only to be certain that you will be hunted—hunted to the uttermost parts of the earth—hunted to the bitter end. No rest! Ah! that is just the hideous part of it—that never-slackening struggle for safety, that eternal gnawing fear. What an existence it must be! what he must have suffered! What *I* must suffer if I fail in my hateful task. How little he dreams that it is *I* who——. And it was his hand that helped me in the hour of need. Had he but known the truth, what easier than to have let me drown like a dog? How can I bring myself to do it? And yet, how can I face the terrible alternative—the martyrdom that I see him suffering?"

He hid his haggard face in his hands and groaned aloud. "Oh God!" he murmured hoarsely, "let him die there in his sleep, and save me from the committal of the deed I shudder at."

Then, as he raised his head once more and

gazed out over the glassy sea, he started, and, shading his eyes with shaking hands from the glare of the sun, uttered an exclamation in which hope and despair were curiously blended—hope of approaching rescue, despair at the necessity of the dreadful choice that rescue was to force on him—for there, against the sky-line, rising higher and higher every minute as she came nearer and nearer, a little while ago "hull down," and now with smoking funnel plainly discernible between her masts, he saw a big ocean steamer dead astern, and holding a course that in an hour must bring her within easy sight of the cast-aways.

The sight seemed to cast the poor, weak, ragged wretch into deeper dejection than ever, as he sat there thinking, thinking.

At last he roused himself. "It must be done before she sights us," he muttered; "done at once, before he wakes, and can make a fight for life. We are both as weak as two cats."

He rose as if to make his way aft, then paused in seeming irresolution.

"I *can't* bring myself to do it," he went on, with a gesture of despair. "After all we have suffered together, it seems a thousand times worse. And yet it must be done, or I shall become in turn the miserable hunted

prey that he has been ; and that is a torture I dare not think of. Better death a hundred times over than that. They say men in his position, even if they elude pursuit for a time, always find it grow too fearful to bear, and end it for themselves. It *must* be done. It is but one blow, and then—freedom ; for the rules allow me to claim freedom from the Council's accursed trammels after such a task."

Then he glanced cautiously around, as if even the waves had eyes to see, and drew from the ragged bosom of his shirt a folded sheet of paper, which he opened and scanned eagerly, as if in search of a spur to the horrible deed he shrank from. The document ran as follows :—

"From the Supreme Council of the N—— Brotherhood.

"Sentence of death for disobedience has to-day been pronounced on Wilfred James Sullivan, of Mersey Street, New York, as witness the Council's seal beneath. By your oath of obedience you are required to carry out the said decree under a similar penalty.

"To William Egan Ffrench, No. IV. Section."

The perusal seemed to nerve the unhappy man to his terrible task. He replaced the paper in his bosom, and, unsheathing a heavy hunting-knife he wore in his belt, commenced to crawl cautiously, and with evident difficulty,

across the thwarts towards the sleeper in the stern.

* * * * *

(Extract from a letter from the Hon. Eric Wylde to Lady Mountstreet.)

"My Dear Mother,

"You will be glad to hear that the *Pandora*, with my own precious personality on board, arrived safely at Melbourne last night. I must confess I am delighted to find myself on antipodean *terra firma* at last, for a slower, more uninteresting voyage than that from 'Frisco I cannot imagine. The passengers on the *Pandora* were not of a description to raise one's spirits, or one's ideal of human nature. The men did nothing all day but gamble and smoke in the deck-house smoking-room (an endless round of eternal poker does pall on one after a time), while the women were the plainest-headed collection of femininity it has ever been my fortune to meet. I think I can hear your maternal self-congratulations on that score, for I know your dread that I shall bring you home some wild, half-civilised Western lassie as a daughter-in-law. You may make your mind easy, my dear mother; I am not half so inflammable an individual as you think.

"By Jove! How often and how regretfully I looked back on the sport I had in the Rockies with Jemmy Delorme. He is going back to England next month, and will call on you in town. I made him promise to come down to Malton Towers in November, for the pheasants. I shall be home before then, you know.

"By the way, we did have one rather exciting episode on the voyage. We were about a week out from San Francisco, when we came upon a poor, starved castaway in a little open boat. It was lucky for the unfortunate wretch that we turned up when we did, for he could not

have lasted much longer. He was in the final stage of exhaustion when he was rescued, and had to be hauled up the ship's side in a chair; and a fearful gaunt, emaciated scarecrow the poor fellow looked, I can tell you. However, he soon recovered with strengthening food and kind treatment. It appeared that the steamer *May Queen*, by which vessel he was a passenger, had been run down on a foggy night, and sunk almost instantly. He happened to be on deck at the time, was chucked overboard by the shock, and managed to scramble after a time into the boat, which somehow hadn't gone down with the ship. When it was light enough to see, he found he was the only survivor of the entire show. We made up a subscription for him on board, poor devil! and took him on with us to Melbourne. His name was William Ffrench."

About the same time that Lady Mount-street was rejoicing her maternal heart in London with the perusal of her wandering offspring's epistle, "Number Three" of the Supreme Council of the N—— Brotherhood was standing in the upper room of the *quasi Ignoti* Club-house in New York, contemplating with a grim smile of satisfaction a document which had been handed into headquarters from No. IV. Section of the Society.

"So Mr. Ffrench has performed his task," he said to himself, "and I am 150,000 dollars to the good. Claims exemption under the rules, does he? and proposes to make a fresh start in England under a new name.

A clear case of desertion of the pretty Marie. Well, I've no objection, I'm sure. It's all in my favour; I ought to be able to make some headway with 'Ariadne' now, at all events."

PART II.

IN ITS DISGUISE—1885.

CHAPTER I.

LORD RAVENSCOURT'S WOOING.

"It is really refreshing to see a man drink his cup of afternoon tea *con amore*. As a rule, the nobler sex take it down in a way that irresistibly suggests medicine or a painful, if necessary, sacrifice to the *genus loci*. I confess I am grateful to you, Lord Ravenscourt; your manner, on the contrary, is a compliment to my tea-pot. Do have another cup."

The individual thus addressed laughed genially as he surrendered the fragile china thimble, that nowadays does duty as a tea-cup, into the outstretched hand of his hostess.

"What an unselfish woman you are," he said. "The adoration of your tea-pot appears to gratify you more than the homage paid to yourself. Don't you see that the hasty gulp and the wry face are something for you to be proud of, as showing the very depth of the sacrifice your admirers are willing to make that they may worship at your shrine—the penalty they are only too glad to pay for admission to this temple? As for

me, Nature unquestionably designed me for a washerwoman, and my original partiality for the 'cup that cheers, &c.' has been fostered and developed by a long course of globe-trotting. Let me tell you, Madame Francese, that tea is to the traveller very much what rum is to the sailor." And Lord Ravenscourt sipped away at his fresh supply with evident relish.

Madame Francese glanced at him with a look of mingled amusement and admiration in her beautiful dark eyes; and, indeed, the man was one on whom any woman's gaze would have rested complacently enough. The crisply-curled, grizzled hair and long grey moustache formed a sufficiently striking contrast with a skin bronzed by exposure in all climates to a hue that was of almost Asiatic darkness, while, thin and spare as the tall figure was, it did not require more than a second glance at the sinewy frame to impress the observer with the idea of immense strength and powers of endurance. But, perhaps, what above all arrested attention was the expression on the well-formed, but massive features of quiet self-contained, though conscious power; an expression born of many perils successfully surmounted, of dangers such as few have faced, of years of adventurous travel in the dark corners of the earth,

of death in every shape and form by land and sea confronted and braved a hundred times.

Such was the man who sat there in the celebrated songstress's charming little drawing room, that brilliant July afternoon ; nor was it by any means the first occasion on which Lord Ravenscourt (he had but lately come into the title) had been the occupier of that cosy arm-chair at the side of the well-shaded window, where the glaring sunlight was filtered down into soft rosy tints through the heavy intervening curtains. The fact is, that from the evening of his first introduction to Madame Francese at a *soirée* of the Lyric Club, some few months back, he had discovered the difficulty of rendering himself insensible to the attractions of that lady's intellectual and physical charms. He found his visits to that pretty drawing-room in Kensington becoming more and more frequent as time went on ; found himself looking forward with more and more eagerness every day to the next opportunity for one of those pleasant afternoons in that little easy-chair by the window, while his still beautiful hostess chatted to him as only a clever, intellectual, observant woman can chat, mingling now and again deeper thoughts with the flow of lighter humour. Sometimes, even, she would sit down to the piano and sing to him some

half-forgotten gem of Schubert, or some old pathetic, melodious *volkslied* from times long past, in that full, glorious, rich contralto which, before she had, all too soon, retired from the concert stage after a brief period of unexampled success, had held so many thousands of hearers spellbound and enthralled. Before the season had come to an end, Cecil Ravenscourt, that "mighty hunter before the Lord," acknowledged to himself that he had fallen a victim in his turn to a mightier hunter still, the little blind archer, the deadliness of whose shafts has dated back from time immemorial.

Nor, indeed, was there much cause for wonder, misogynistic as had been his views hitherto. Madame Francese, as that lady continued to call herself even after her retirement from public life, was indebted to Nature for more than her voice. Her charms were of an order that maturity only enhances, and now, in her seventh lustre, her dark, rich beauty overshadowed the paler radiance of many a far younger claimant of the girdle of Venus. Her five-and-thirty years in adding to the stately grace of that majestic figure had not quenched the fire or lessened the depth of those glorious eyes, nor flecked with even a thread of silver that glossy raven hair.

"I hope you are thinking of giving it up," the lady resumed, in response to her visitor's last remark—"the travelling, not the tea, I mean—now that all these new duties have devolved on your overburdened shoulders. How does it feel to be a bulwark of the Constitution? You know we Americans have a sneaking admiration for the Upper House, however much we may decry that institution in public. Are you going to demolish your enemies in debate, or do you intend to establish a sphinx-like reputation for silent wisdom?"

"The latter, I fancy," was the laughing reply. "You see, I resemble the celebrated parrot—not much to talk or to look at, but a perfect beggar to think. By the way, are you going to the *première* to-night at the Regent's Theatre—Escott's new piece, you know?"

"I am sorry to say that I'm not. I accepted an invitation a month ago to dine at old Lady Borenough's, and she was so good and kind to me when I first came over to England that I wouldn't put her off for anything. I can't get away early, either, for there's an 'At Home' in the evening, and, of course, I must offer to sing. I don't like that any one should ever have grounds for the application in my case of the definition of gratitude as 'only a lively sense of favours to

come.' I'm dreadfully disgusted, though. I suppose all the world and his wife will be at the Regent's. The Escotts are some connection of yours, aren't they? I was introduced to Mr. Escott once at some *conversazione;* but before we had exchanged half-a-dozen words there was a sort of spurious football scrimmage on the announcement of supper, and we were at once separated by a flood of seething, hungry and thirsty humanity."

"Yes," Lord Ravenscourt replied. "He married a cousin and ward of mine, a Miss Harrington. You would like them both so much. They interest me; they are so foolishly fond of each other. To tell you the truth, I am not altogether surprised at it; she is a very sweet girl, and Willie Escott is one of the best fellows that ever stepped; I am very fond of him. He is by way of being a countryman of yours—at least, he was born in America. Of good Irish extraction, I believe; but his people died when he was a youngster, and he has no kith or kin left."

At this juncture a servant entered the room, and, making his way to Madame Francese, extended for her inspection the conventional salver charged with a visiting-card.

"The gentleman wants to know whether you can give him a private interview, ma'am,"

he said. "He has just arrived from New York, and would be glad if you could see him."

His mistress took the card in her fingers and glanced at it. As she did so a flush of anger coloured her brow, and with a quick, impetuous movement she tore the card across. "Give my compliments to Mr. Atherton," she exclaimed, "and say I must decline to see him. I am 'not at home' if he should ever presume to call again, Barton; please remember. It is really too bad," she continued, as the man left the room. "There ought to be a law to protect one from being pestered like this. I sometimes wish I were a man for an hour or so."

"I *am* a man, for more than that limited period," said Lord Ravenscourt, gravely. "I think you know me well enough to justify you in looking on me in the light of a friend, Madame Francese. Is this a matter in which I can be of any use to you? If so, I shall deem your confidence a great favour."

His companion looked at him for a moment with a grateful expression in her dark, lustrous eyes. "It is very good of you," she said, "and there is no one I would more willingly come to for assistance if I needed it; but I can take care of myself in these matters. The fact is, that the man is a mule-headed

admirer of days gone by, who has never realised the necessity of taking 'no' for an answer. He belongs to the class—a pretty numerous one—which considers any woman who appears in public for a wage to have thereby renounced any claim to the ordinary courtesies of society. She becomes in his eyes a sort of prey, to be followed and pestered with impunity. I suffer but little from that kind of persecution now, I am thankful to say; but I had plenty of hardships and intolerable annoyances to put up with when my public career first began, Lord Ravenscourt, I can assure you."

Her companion's brow contracted, and there came a look on his face which would have boded ill for the intrusive visitor had that individual been present. There were a few moments of silence, then—

"You have it in your power to put an end, once for all, to any such inflictions," he said quietly. "Give me the right to do so and I will guarantee to prevent their recurrence. These gentry will not presume to pester my wife."

"Lord Ravenscourt!"

"Yes," he went on, more hurriedly now. "See here, Marie—I *will* call you by the name my heart has been re-echoing for months past—I love you very, very dearly.

I have loved you, I think, ever since that night we first met. I know well enough there are heavy odds against me. My youth is gone, and I am a travel-worn, rough fellow enough, but my love is none the weaker or less trustworthy for that. No—hear me out; let me say my say before you turn me away. I swear to you, if you will trust yourself to me, that my one thought shall be your happiness, my one endeavour to wrap your existence in the warmth of a true man's strong, enduring affection. I will win your love by sheer force of loving. I will strive to guard your life from every pain and care, until you confess at last that you are happier in my rough arms than you could ever have been in those of the most polished, soft-spoken society-enslaver of them all. Say, Marie, will you let me try?"

There was no mistaking the true, strong ring of genuine passion in the speaker's voice, or the steadfast, honest affection in the bold grey eyes—a tone and look that no good woman, however heart-whole, can face altogether unmoved. The traces of emotion on Madame Francese's beautiful, expressive features showed that she was no exception to the general rule. At first she had striven with an eloquent gesture of the outstretched, shapely hands to check the torrent of his

words; but, as he ceased, she was fain to use their soft, white shelter to hide the tears she was unable to suppress.

"Oh, Lord Ravenscourt!" she cried, at length. "Why have you done this? Why would you not stop when I wanted you to? We have been such good friends; why could you not let it all remain as it was?"

"Why?" he echoed. "Because it is your love, not your friendship, that I want, Marie. Do you think I am a man likely to be contented with a proffered stone when I hunger for bread? Why have I done this? Because I must either win you and wear you before the world as my wife, or else suffer banishment from your presence. Do you not understand? I love you so dearly that no middle course would be endurable."

She was more collected now, and faced him with a proud look in her eyes. "And do you think," she answered, "that because you are mad enough to wish to give me your name and share your title with an ex-public singer, I am selfish and mean enough to let you take a step in the unthinking passion of the moment which you might bitterly regret during every subsequent hour of your life? Think how the world would laugh at you, and sneer at the retired 'star' who had caught a peer. Lord Ravenscourt, one would think you were

an infatuated, silly boy of twenty, and not the experienced man of the world, the daring traveller, the keen, cool hunter whose name is like a household word on other men's tongues. You do not even know what my past life may have been."

He looked at her with even deeper love and admiration in his gaze. "There has been no shadow of disgrace in it, I will stake my life on that," he said. "What matters aught else?"

"Disgrace, no; but misfortune, poverty with all its attendant sordid cares and sorrowful experiences, yes. Listen to me, Lord Ravenscourt, and judge whether or no I am the woman to grace your home, to sit at the head of your table, to be the mother of your children. My earliest remembrance is the careless indifference of a disreputable stepfather; my mother died when I was too young to realise my loss. For the first fifteen years of my life, every day was passed in scenes of the wild lawlessness of a mining state of Western America. Until—thanks to the interference of some old friends of my dead mother's—I was sent to a school in New York, my eyes were accustomed to hourly scenes of drunken riot, my ears to the oaths of brawling gamblers. When I was seventeen, I left school to marry a man just a few

shades more respectable than the rough crew among whom my childhood had been passed. He was a journalist, so poor that I had to take a daily governess's paltry wage to eke out the expenses of our little home. Within a year of our marriage my husband deserted me, and I was left altogether dependent on my own feeble resources."

There was a moment's silence; then Lord Ravenscourt leaned forward in his cahir. His face was white to the very lips, but its expression was far more quietly resolute now than it had been at any previous period of that afternoon's interview.

"Let me know the best or the worst at once, please, Marie," he said, and though his voice was steady enough, its hoarse tones betrayed the terrible anxiety at his heart. "Your husband—the hound who deserted you—does he still live? Are you tied or free?"

Madame Francese smiled sadly. "In your meaning of the term I am free," she answered; "free as air." And as she said the words there came a sigh of relief from her companion's lips. "He died ten years ago," she went on. "He survived a terrible disaster at sea from which he alone was rescued, only to succumb a few months later, on his arrival in England, to the effects of

the privations he had suffered. I should doubtless never have known his fate, never have known that I was again a free woman, but that his name was rendered for a week or so sufficiently notorious as the sole survivor of the *May Queen* collision, where so many hundreds of people lost their lives, for his subsequently obscure death to be deemed worthy of mention in the papers. No, Lord Ravenscourt, it is no tie of that kind that stands as an obstacle between us; but the knowledge that I should be doing you an irremediable wrong were I to become your wife—the wrong that a woman inflicts when she marries a man so immeasurably above her in station. Do you think I could bear to see the sneers of society at your expense? Every slight that might be put upon the ex-public singer by the high-born dames among whom Lady Ravenscourt's lot would be cast I should find more hard to bear a thousandfold, in that they were directed at *your* wife. For myself, such things would matter little; the last eight or nine years have armoured me in indifference to the world's opinion, good, bad, or indifferent, but I am not so selfish as to risk exposing you to what I felt bitterly enough before I had become case-hardened. Let us remain friends, as we always were, Lord Ravens-

court; it will be best so. Have I not said enough to convince you I am right?"

He rose and caught her in his arms. "Yes," he cried; "you have said enough to convince me—to convince me that I have gained a little corner in your heart, and that I should be a fool indeed if I were to lose you now. The world, forsooth! when you and I are to be all the world to each other, your argument anent its sneers can have no possible application in our case. You are too humble, Marie. You little know in what estimation your bugbear really holds you. I tell you it is I who will be held to have obtained a prize far beyond my deserts; it is you who will be crowned *Queen* Cophetua, not I as king. No, my darling, I should indeed deserve to lose you if I allowed your foundationless fears to stand for an instant between me and the prize I covet. Do you think I am such a poor creature as to let any earthly power separate us now? Why, you cannot even take yourself from me; do you suppose I shall allow anybody else to do so?"

He had won, hands down. It has been the same from time immemorial. What avails a woman's weak unselfishness against the power of a man's determination, the tender tones of his voice, the clasp of his

strong arms, and when, too, her heart has turned traitor, and is fighting his battle for him in the very citadel he is seeking to conquer? Yes, Marie Francese loved him, and the shelter of that broad breast was indeed a haven of rest after the turmoil of her chequered life; in that firm clasp she found a sense of happy security to which her unloved existence had hitherto been a stranger. Her beautiful eyes were slowly raised to his, filled with a depth and power of affection that struck him almost with awe at the extent of his good fortune. One lovely arm crept gently round his neck as the stately head was bowed once more, and nestled lovingly on his shoulder.

"Be good to me, Cecil; you are all the world to me," she murmured dreamily, as his lips met hers and clung to them.

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRST NIGHT OF "A JUST REVENGE."

THE Regent's Theatre was packed from floor to ceiling; there was not a vacant seat in the entire house. Society and the critics in the stalls; the habitual first-nighters, a sprinkling of temporarily disengaged professional talent, and sundry intimates of author and manager in the private boxes; eminent respectability in the dress circle, suspended like a sort of social Mahomet's coffin between fashion below and fustian above; the curious conglomeration of middle-class family parties, beer and pipe-loving but highly artistic Bohemianism, city clerks and country cousins in the pit; the humorous, keen-witted, critical, if dirty-faced, "gods" in the gallery—all combined to make up a typical first-night audience.

And, indeed, a new drama by that popular favourite, William Escott, was a matter of considerable moment to the play-going public—an event sufficiently important to command the interested attention of the theatrical world, to occasion innumerable anticipatory remarks in the gossip columns of the press, and to

arouse the general curiosity of the artistic community. It was to be the strongest piece that most successful dramatist had yet produced; it was to deal in so deep-thinking a manner with one of the more abstruse problems of modern civilisation that it was foredoomed to failure as being over the heads of the *hoi polloi;* it was to appeal to the most powerful instincts common alike to peer and peasant. All sorts of contradictory paragraphs would for weeks beforehand appear in the Society papers, all equally foundationless and all alike evolved from the fertile imaginations of the penny-a-liners. Altogether, it was but natural that, when the eventful evening did arrive, it should find the auditorium crammed with an inquisitive crowd of all sorts and conditions of men.

Mr. William Escott might certainly be singled out, among the literary men of the day, as one of Dame Fortune's primest favourites. Probably, had any of his friends been asked to name the most fortunate man of their acquaintance, their suffrages would have at once been given to that successful dramatist and novel writer. If ever a man had been spared the drudgery and disappointment in which the lower rungs of the literary ladder seem invariably to be steeped, but had sprung at one fortunate bound wel

up the ascent into a position where fame and fortune saluted him hand in hand, it was that apparently lucky individual. Not for him the off-hand rejection of months of weary labour by contemptuous theatrical managers, who would probably have bowed Shakespeare to the door unless he had come armed with an adaptation of a "Palais Royal" farce; not for him the preliminary noviciate under the often exposed and now familiar heads-I-win-tails-you-lose system in vogue among certain publishers (there are *some* honourable exceptions, thank goodness!) who would have been capable of demanding from Milton, or even Homer himself, a guarantee for expenses against the doubtful set-off of half profits (if he could get them). His very first book had tickled the public palate; his first comedy had had a stupendous run; and now, for some years, his reputation and his bank balance had grown in pleasant companionship side by side.

Nor were these all the gifts which that most capricious lady had bestowed on Mr. Escott. He had made his appearance in London some eight or nine years back, classified as an Irish-American, without any incumbrances in the shape of unpleasant relations of doubtful habits or position. He was a good-looking, well-educated, gentlemanly, clever young fellow, and somehow the little

fresh world in which he found himself accepted the total absence of his previous history with a most unwonted equanimity, born of its appreciation of an agreeable presence and varied social gifts. If at first a few of the less susceptible natures to the pleasures of his companionship now and again suggested that, for all they knew, Mr. Escott might have been born in a workhouse and reared in a gaol, their hinted suspicious doubts were shortly obscured in the general feeling of favouritism *à son égard* which soon reigned supreme.

A year after his earliest literary successes the gentleman in question was fortunate enough to woo and win a lady whose charms, both physical and mental, must have caused the tenth commandment to be pretty frequently broken by many of his bachelor (and perhaps even some of his married) acquaintances.

It would be a difficult task, and one altogether beyond my limited powers, to describe Lucy Escott in terms that would do justice to the subtle charm that seemed to emanate from every varying expression of the sweet face, every movement of the graceful figure, every tone of the silvery, melodious voice. What is a poor author to do in such a case? He can tell his reader that the

lady's hair was brown with those bronze-gold shadows that to an artist's eye make all the difference between the commonplace and the ideal, between brown hair as it is ordinarily understood, and brown hair idealised. He can tell how in rippling luxuriance it crowns the broad, low forehead; he can write of the deep, glorious, hazel eyes, now bright with the gleam of merry, healthy *lebenslust* (we have no English equivalent for this word), now darkly softening in sympathy or affection; he may describe the exquisite tender mouth, so rich, so mobile, and yet at times so strong; or the beautifully moulded chin with its charming dimple that shows and disappears so mysteriously with every fleeting smile; the soft oval of the cheek with its delicate creamy tint just faintly warmed (no more) by the rose hues that try to struggle through—he can do all that, and yet is bound to leave his task hopelessly incomplete. Lucy Escott was, in short, a superlatively lovely woman—let the reader fill in the details as seemeth to him good, while we get on with our story.

Never had man a more devoted wife, and —in the fulness of time—a more charming little daughter; and William Escott showed his appreciation of these blessings by adoring the one and literally worshipping the other.

And, indeed, the man had good cause to do both, for a happier home than was to be found in his pretty house at Hampstead it would be difficult to imagine.

And yet his face was not the face of a happy man. There was that about the lines of the mouth, the faint contraction of the eyebrows, the half-weary, half-distrustful expression of the eyes themselves, which spoke of some past sorrow still unforgotten, some anxiety still undissipated. It is true that he would have ridiculed and laughed to scorn any such suggestion as utterly foundationless; but to a close observer and judge of physiognomy, the way in which when drawn into self-forgetfulness in conversation, or lost in some subject of abnormal interest, the lines would fade away, the brows open, the man's whole expression change, only once more to return to the old stereotyped look of worry and regret, shadowy though it might be, but bore the stronger evidence to the cloud of some terrible experience in his past which seemed to cross the sunshine and cast a chill on his present happiness.

There was no shadow now, however, on William Escott's brow, as he stood at the back of the stage-box, awaiting the rise of the curtain on his own creation, and listening with a merry smile to the story his old

friend Lord Ravenscourt was relating to Lucy.

"Harold Pawle told us an amusing incident last night," said his Lordship. "He was walking back to his rooms from the club, late on Thursday, or rather, to be precise, early on Friday, and, passing through Clarges Street, came upon a belated elderly individual, who had evidently dined 'not wisely, but too well,' and who seemed to find an insurmountable difficulty in successfully negotiating his latch-key hole. His efforts were so unduly prolonged that at last Pawle crossed the street, and went to his assistance. When, by their united efforts, the door was opened, nothing would satisfy the old gentleman but the knowledge of his rescuer's name; he resolutely refused to go in and get to bed until he knew to whom he was indebted. 'Well, if you really *must* know,' said Harold at last, 'my name is Pawle;' on which the venerable reveller seized his hand and shook it warmly. 'Mosht d'lighted make your 'quaintanshe, shir,' he hiccoughed out. 'Mosht d'lighted, I'm shure. Always had greatesht admirashion for your shecond epistle to G'lations. Goo' night!'"

Escott laughed heartily. "to *non è vero, è ben trovato,*" he said. "I say, Cecil, just

resume your duties as Lucy's guardian for this evening, will you? Look after her, and protect her from a rabid and infuriated audience in case of failure, there's a good fellow. They will ring up in another five minutes, and I want to go behind."

"I have some rather startling news for you, Lucy," said her cousin, as Escott left the box. "I would have told Willie just now, but that I know he has quite enough to think of with regard to his own affairs at the moment, without troubling his head with mine as well. You can impart the astounding intelligence to him, when you get him to yourself. What do you think I am going to do?"

"Well, from the impressive seriousness of your manner, Cecil," was the laughing reply, "I should say you have been making arrangements for your own funeral. As, however, you look in fairly good health, the only thing I can think of as a sufficiently terrible alternative would be, if I were not so well acquainted with your confirmed old bachelor habits, that you were going to be married."

"A year ago, I should have asserted they were much about the same thing," remarked Lord Ravenscourt. "However, you are very 'hot,' as the children say. I am going to join the army of martyrs, after all, Lucy."

"Oh, Cecil; really? Do you actually mean it?" Mrs. Escott exclaimed, with all a woman's delight at such news. Surely, if in a future state there is to be no marrying or giving in marriage, Heaven for the fair sex will appear shorn of one of their most pleasurable topics of conversation. "Who is she? May I know?"

"Of course you may, you silly child. I'm making no secret of it. It's wonderful how quickly things get about. The affair was only settled this afternoon, and I'll be shot if Meredith Colquhoun didn't come up and congratulate me, at the 'Travellers,' half-an-hour ago. The lady is Madame Francese."

"What! the great singer? Oh, Cecil! I am so pleased. Everybody says she is perfectly charming. Do you know, I have never met her, curiously enough."

"Well, you'll have every opportunity of making her acquaintance, if you don't mind granting the request I am going to make. I've made her promise to join our cruise in the Mediterranean, if you will chaperone her and play propriety. I was sure you and Willie wouldn't mind. She'll be ready to start with you both to-morrow night, as you had arranged, and do Paris with you on the way. Is it a bargain? Yes? Hullo! there

goes the curtain. Now for Master Willie's experiment."

If the new piece was an experiment, as Lord Ravenscourt termed it, it bade fair to be a successful one. "A Just Revenge" seemed to "take on" from the very opening speech, although, perhaps, the subtle germ of thought which had really been the mainspring of action in the author's mind passed in many instances over the heads of his audience. Apart from the love interest, which was of more than ordinary strength, the real *motif* of the drama was a vindication of the *duello* under special circumstances—circumstances where it became necessary to adapt the opportunity of personal vengeance to the protection of those nearest and dearest when more legitimate weapons were of necessity insufficient to the task. In all William Escott's later plays it had been his endeavour in dramatic form to illustrate what he judged to be the correct solution of some one or other of the more difficult social problems of modern civilisation. So far he had always been able to carry his audience with him in his views, but in this case he felt success was more difficult of attainment in proportion to the preponderance of contrary opinions to his own on the subject among English Society at large. Could he

construct a situation of sufficient dramatic power, and put on his colours with sufficient intensity to overcome so deeply-rooted a prejudice, and prove his point by the only argument allowed to the dramatist—the capture of his audience's sympathies? After all, Lord Ravenscourt was right when he used the term "experiment" in connection with the new play.

William Escott's face was radiant with pleasure as he rejoined his wife and friend when the curtain fell on the close of the first act, and the unanimous if noisy approbation of stalls, pit, and gallery told that, so far at all events, he had the house with him.

"That's a promising commencement, anyhow," he remarked as he entered the box. "That Miss Drelincourt is a perfect treasure; she has fairly fitted herself into the heroine's skin. She is a *rara avis* amongst actresses, in so far that she is not above taking a hint. Sensible girl! she actually came to me a fortnight ago of her own accord, and cross-examined me for half an hour so as to satisfy herself what my conception of the character really was. The house seems to have 'caught on,' Cecil; I think it will be all right."

"I always made sure the earlier acts would go," said Ravenscourt, who knew the plot of the piece well enough, and who was by no

means an indiscriminate distributor of soap and soft sawder. "The crucial test will be at the fall of the last curtain. A fatal duel where the hero deliberately polishes off his antagonist is a bold experiment, Willie, where a modern audience is concerned, except in a 'dress piece.' They'll hardly even stand it in a novel. There is in England a virtuous timidity of strong measures when clad in nineteenth century costume which is sufficiently idiotic when subjected to logical analysis, but which is nevertheless real enough."

"That is because the public have been of late so fed on soaked biscuit that they are apt to find the necessary mastication of strong animal food an unwelcome task for their enervated jaws. Yet meat is better for them than pap, and they will like it better, too, once you can bring them to give it a trial. The fact is, that both dramatists and novelists have got too much in the habit lately of running into extremes, and lifting their heroes as much above the level of ordinary humanity as they depress their villains below it. If the modern hero of fiction finds himself a principal in a duel, he is expected to allow himself to be riddled with his antagonist's bullets at short range, and then to magnanimously spare that individual's life,

and fire in the air. Real humanity, my dear Cecil, isn't built that way at all. Lever is much truer to life in that respect than many a greater novelist. There are, of course, many cases where magnanimity may find full scope for itself without offending the probabilities, but there are occasions when, if a man fights at all, he should aim straight or thrust hard."

Lord Ravenscourt laughed. "You old philosopher," he said; "how you do stick out for principle. I expect you, of all men, would be about the first to break your own rule."

"I don't think so," returned Escott, thoughtfully. "It would take some superlatively strong reason to make me 'go out,' but if I realised that such a step was necessary, both for my own sake and that of others, I should consider I was justified in doing my best for myself in fair fight with no more scruple than I should have on a legalised battlefield. I hope my views will never be put to the test, but if they were—say under circumstances parallel to those I am putting before the public to-night—I don't think even tender-hearted Lucy here would thank me for sacrificing her and little Phyllis's lives and happiness to a sentimental prejudice. Eh, Lucy?"

Mrs. Escott raised her soft, luminous eyes to her husband's face. "It would be a

terrible thing to think there was blood on a hand that you loved," she said. "Still, there might be worse things even than that. A soldier's wife does not shrink from him because he may have fought and killed the Queen's enemies. Why should she do so when he has fought and risked his life for her and hers? After all, I believe there is always a sort of sneaking respect for duelling in every woman's heart, in spite of its being such an anachronism. But aren't we giving these hypothetical cases rather a personal turn?"

"It is the only real way of deciding them, after all," said Lord Ravenscourt. "Personally, I think you are quite right. We shall see in an hour's time what the view of the public is on the subject."

But the public turned out to be of Mrs. Escott's way of thinking. The development of the plot of the new piece was accompanied by the ever-growing enthusiasm of the audience, and the close of each succeeding act was greeted with louder and louder applause, until when the crucial point arrived —thanks, perhaps, to the skill with which the original motive of revenge for wrongs inflicted was subordinated to that of chivalrous self-sacrifice for the protection of others, which was developed as the action of the play pro-

gressed—there was no dissentient voice among the throng to justify Lord Ravenscourt's earlier prognostications. Even the closing episode of "A Just Revenge," terribly realistic though the actor's art made it, failed to rouse a feeling of repulsion, and the dramatic conclusion it afforded in its culminating interest remained unmarred by the jarring of the weaker sensibilities which less skilful treatment might have occasioned. When the final curtain fell there could exist no doubt in the mind of any present of the entire success of William Escott's latest effort.

As actor and actress, one after another, were summoned before the curtain amidst a thunder of applause that shook the house, Lucy's mobile face grew radiant with pride and pleasure, and when it was succeeded by vociferous calls for the author from every corner of the auditorium, two or three silent, happy tears stole down her flushed cheeks behind the shelter of her fan. There was no prouder, happier woman in the land that night than Lucy Escott in the presence of her husband's latest triumph. Was there no warning note among the shouts that told of his success? No chill presentiment of coming evil amidst the glow engendered by that public recognition of his genius? There was none for her; but was there none for him?

The past two hours had been a period of inexpressible gratification to the dramatist. To see the object of all his thought and care and of the mental labour of many months take firm grip from the very first of the sympathies of his audience; to watch it minute by minute tighten its hold upon their interest until its culmination—this was a pleasure of which no one who has never known an artist's love for the creation of his own brain can ever properly appreciate the intensity. The tinge of uncertainty inseparable from a "first night" only heightened the delight of unequivocal ultimate success. When, at the fall of the final curtain, he heard the words of congratulation from all around him, when he saw the pride and triumph (for him) in his wife's glad face, when he felt his old friend Ravenscourt's hearty hand-clasp, there was for the moment no shadow of the past upon the present happiness, no taint of bitterness in his overflowing cup of gladness.

"You were right and I was wrong, old man," said the latter. "The public have swallowed your 'justifiable homicide' without as much as a wry face, and have gone up several steps in my estimation in consequence. My belief in you as a pill administrator is now unbounded, and if you make your next hero murder or marry his grandmother, I

shall have nothing to say. You have my heartiest congratulations, my dear fellow. I must be off now to catch the last train to Portsmouth, and the *Almira* will sail to-morrow. Remember, you all join me at Genoa on the fifteenth. No one can say you haven't earned your holiday, and a cruise in the Mediterranean will be the making of you both. *Au revoir!* Tell him the news when you get home, Lucy."

And still the cries of "author" grew more clamorous and urgent; the public claimed their right to see and congratulate their favourite in person, and would not be denied.

When, at length, William Escott came before the curtain to bow his thanks, his reception was of a description to fitly crown the triumph of the night. The roar of applause that greeted his appearance was both deafening and sustained, and when, after the lapse of several minutes, the natural exhaustion of mortal lungs caused it to lessen in volume, the pause was of but momentary duration, and the popular enthusiasm was again and again renewed.

It was during one of these temporary lulls in the hurricane of noise which filled the theatre that Lucy, who from her box was a delighted witness of the scene, saw her husband's flushed face of pleasure suddenly

set in an expression of startled surprise and grow whiter and whiter, until its pallor extended to his very lips. His limbs for an instant seemed to falter under him, and it was evidently only by a powerful effort that he succeeded in pulling himself sufficiently together to make his farewell bow to the audience and retire to the shelter of the proscenium wing.

"A trifle overwrought—and no wonder. The excitement a bit too much for him, I expect." These and similar remarks among the now departing audience met Lucy's ear as she stood at the door of her box, anxiously awaiting her husband's return from the stage, and showed her that the incident had not passed unnoticed by others besides herself in the front of the house. Was he ill? Had she not better go to him? she was wondering, when he made his appearance at her side.

"What was it, Willie?" she asked, looking up at his face and noticing that it still bore traces of his late sudden indisposition. "Are you ill, dear? Can I do anything to help you?"

He shook his head with the old weary, worried, anxious look on his countenance to which she had now almost become accustomed and which she had always hitherto set down

to overwork and mental fatigue. "It is nothing of any consequence. I was a bit over excited, that was all. I am all right again now, my pet; but we will get off home as soon as we can. I am pretty nearly fagged out. I suppose it is the reaction after all this business," he said in answer to her inquiries.

During the long drive to Hampstead, the dramatist leaned back in the corner of the brougham in silence. His wife, glancing at him once or twice as they passed a street lamp, or the gleaming light from some still open music hall, saw that his eyes were closed and thought he must be sleeping, wearied out with all the excitement of the evening; but she was mistaken. The man's brain was still whirling with the sudden shock which had so affected him half an hour ago.

Through all the noise and traffic of the streets they traversed, through all the dull, continuous rumble of the carriage wheels, he still heard the sound of a voice which had reached him as he stood triumphant and happy on the stage of the Regent's Theatre during that lull in the storm of applause; and in his ears still rung the name it had uttered —a name that had turned his joy into bitterness, the sweetness of success into gall.

It was the name of William Ffrench!

CHAPTER III.

BLACKMAIL.

Among the numberless discussions held that night on the subject of the new success at the Regent's Theatre, there was none, perhaps, that would have so interested the author of "A Just Revenge," had he known of it, as one that was taking place in a corner of the Métropole Hotel smoking-room, while Escott's brougham was rolling rapidly along in the direction of Hampstead.

Of the two men who, in a secluded nook of the great half-empty apartment, were engaged in an animated but low-toned conversation on that interesting subject, the reader may recognise one as an old acquaintance, but little altered in general appearance since we saw him last in New York some ten or eleven years ago. The lines on Thomas Atherton's dark, handsome face might be somewhat deeper and more strongly marked than of yore, the evil light that at times shone in the steel-blue eyes a thought keener and more cruel, there might be a few streaks of grey on the smooth, sleek head, but Time

had certainly dealt more lightly with him than it had with many a man with not a tithe of such cause for disquietude as a conscience so overburdened with treachery might reasonably be expected to produce.

His companion we have not met before. Tall, spare, and elderly, with clean-shaven, strongly-marked but somewhat coarse features, he formed a decided contrast to the man beside him. He wore a long frock-coat of the glossy black broadcloth usually associated with the Sunday garments of the well-to-do British artizan and the proverbial "store-clothes" of the American lower middle classes. His thin grey hair was long and lank, and his coat collar bore greasy evidence to an extravagant use of pomatum.

"How could I recognise him?" this individual was saying, in reply to some question of the younger man's. "I told you before, the marriage was engineered in New York, while I was tied down at that darned old mine in Nevada. When he'd only got to run away with a green gal from school he warn't likely to travel all that distance just to shake hands with his father-in-law elect—now, was he? No; I've never seen my man before to-night; but there ain't much question of any mistake, even putting that letter in his own handwriting a one side. I tell you, when I tried

that trick you suggested this afternoon, and gave him a dose of his own name while they were all screeching and cheering him like mad to-night, it made him just squirm up to nothing. He got the colour of a sick nigger and looked most like to topple over on to the big drum among the music-men. We've got him tight enough, you bet your bottom dollar."

And the speaker took a suck at a big cigar that stuck out of the corner of his mouth, like the boom of an eighty-ton racing cutter, and then finished off the tumbler of whisky and soda in front of him at a single gulp.

Atherton looked at him with an expression of half-amused contempt.

"The sooner you're at him the better, then," he said, after a moment's pause.

The elder man shook his head. "Not much," he answered. "From what I heard to-night, I reckon I see my way to killing two birds with one stone. I overheard a fine bit of news for me while I was sitting among the young dudes in the stalls, and looking as smug and innocent as a tumbler of milk punch. I guess I'll have another son-in-law to cultivate before long. Altogether, business is looking up nicely."

"What do you mean?" asked Atherton.

"Wal, from what one of those young sports

said to another, I found out that my gal is going to become a member of the bloated aristocracy of this one-horse old country. But perhaps you know more about it than I do. You called at her house this afternoon, didn't you?"

"Go on with your story, man, can't you?" exclaimed his companion, with a muttered oath. "I called on Madame Francese, as she chooses to call herself, certainly; but she was engaged, and couldn't see me."

"That was just about the figure, you bet," was the reply. "She and her precious lord were billing and cooing in the parlour while you were ringing at the front door, I shouldn't wonder. Anyhow, I heard it said to-night that she was going to marry a pal of one of the nobs sitting alongside me—Lord Ravenscourt they called him. I reckon both she and he would sing another tune if they knew what we do. However, once let 'em get tight hitched and she shall have a call from her old stepfather that she hasn't seen for so many years, and I shall be able to find out what sort of a lining the gentleman has got to his pockets."

Thomas Atherton set his glass down with an oath that would have made a man with a less robust digestion for such things than his companion shudder, as it was hissed out

from between tightly-set teeth. To tell the truth, the man was half mad with a furious unreasoning jealousy as he thought of the woman, whose beauty he had so long coveted in vain, finding even a day's transient happiness in another's embraces. The years that had passed since the poor daily governess had first inflamed his evil, sensuous imagination; the persistency with which, even during his wife's short lifetime, he had vainly striven to obtain the fulfilment of his base desires, had only strengthened his determination and whetted his appetite. But it was torture to him to picture another sipping the sweets which had up to the present been denied to him. At Mrs. Atherton's death, which had followed shortly on her unhappy brother's disappearance, he had been able, unhampered, to devote all his time and energies to the pursuit of what had gradually become his chief aim in life. It had been his hand that had brought to his intended victim's notice the announcement of her husband's rescue from the *May Queen* disaster and his subsequent death in England. When Mrs. Atherton's decease had set him free also, he had lost no time in offering her vacant place to the needy, struggling concert-singer, (for such the ex-governess had now become), who was in a few short years to rise to fame; and her

contemptuous refusal to marry the man who during his wife's lifetime had insulted her with his attentions had only hardened his resolve to gain his end, no matter through what depths of villainy he might have to wade to do so. No; the delay suggested by the elder man might be diplomatic enough from his point of view, but Atherton's jealousy could not brook the thought of its consequences. Marie Francese should not find one single hour's happiness in her lover's clasp if he could prevent it.

"Look here, Simmonds," he said determinedly, "if you want to play your own game with your precious son-in-law, you'll just have to do it at once. You had better call on him to-morrow morning, and see what terms you can screw out of him. I've got plans of my own that any delay will interfere with."

"I reckon I'm not going to be any such dodgasted a fool as to do anything of the sort," was the reply. "Why, man, I fancy the other will be the richer mine of the two. We'll share the whole pile fair and square enough, you needn't fear; but I ain't quite doddering idiot enough to chuck good money clean away, just because you've got some fad in your head. Why should I?"

There was a threatening gleam in Atherton's

steely eyes, and a quiet, cruel smile on his thin lips, as he leant towards his companion.

"Why should you? my good friend," he said. "I'll tell you why, if you like. Because a Mr. John Simmonds, who was a humble but trusted official of a—well, let us call it a club, in New York—a club that shall be nameless, once occupied some of his leisure hours in abstracting certain documents from the premises of one of its—say managers—documents which the said Mr. John Simmonds fondly hoped to utilise for his own benefit, pecuniary or otherwise. He was certainly running what many people would consider a pretty severe risk; and when he was caught in the act by the—a—the manager whose safe he was exploring, it really looked as if he were going to have a bad time, didn't it, now? Try and remember, my good fellow, what would have been Mr. John Simmonds's fate when that—a—manager caught him with a letter in his hand (a very interesting letter it was, too, and likely to be of value to him)—what would have been his fate, I say, if his captor had not had pity on him, and allowed him to get off with that letter on certain conditions as to sharing the harvest it might bring in? Myself, I think it was uncommonly lenient of him, when a word from him meant *death*. And I

think, too, it would be excessively foolish for Mr. John Simmonds to run counter to his views in any way, considering that word could be spoken now just as effectively as it could have been then. I think you'll take my advice, on second thoughts, and pay your visit to the celebrated dramatist to-morrow; eh! my friend?"

Mr. Simmonds had been uneasily shifting himself on his chair from one position to another during this speech, while hatred, fear, and finally sullen submission had each in turn found expression on his coarse features.

"Curse it! Have your own way, then," he said at last. "Of course, I know you've got the upper hand, and that I'm to give in, and get monkey's allowance all through. Come, give me my instructions, for that's what it means in plain English. I ought to know by this time what being allowed to play my own game in my own fashion signifies. Well; what is it I am to do?"

The younger but craftier scoundrel leaned back again in his chair, crossed his legs, and lit a fresh cigar with an air of quiet self-complacency.

"How often am I to tell you, my good fellow," he said, with an evil little smile, "that I, personally, have nothing to do in

this matter of yours beyond profiting by your success, and perhaps giving you a little friendly advice when you are really in need of it? Now if you like to put it in that way, my poor brains are entirely at your service."

As he spoke there was an expression on Mr. Simmonds's face which would have intimated to an observer that, if this last assertion were literally true, Thomas Atherton's brains would have stood a very fair chance of ornamenting the fireplace. As, however, it could only be looked on as mere hyperbole, Simmonds contented himself with a shrug of the shoulders and the monosyllable "Wal?"

"Well, what I should advise," continued the other, composedly, "would be that you should call at the gentleman's house about half-past ten to-morrow, and ask for an interview, without sending in your name, but just simply stating that your business is of the most urgent nature. Then, when you are fairly face to face with your recreant son-in-law, tax him with the desertion of your daughter, and see how he takes it. I should think it probable that he'll start by denying that he has ever had anything to do with the name of Ffrench. You'll have to bluff him on that, and, as you know you have the trump card up your sleeve, that ought to be easy enough."

"I reckon he'll want to know how I've spotted him, won't he?"

"Well, what is to prevent his having been recognised to-night by some old mutual acquaintance of his and yours? For the matter of that, your daughter is in town, isn't she? You needn't say who she really is, you know. I shouldn't give him a clue to that letter of his, beyond saying that you are prepared with documentary evidence, if necessary. Trust me, he'll soon come to terms. As for the letter itself, if you're wise, you'll seal it up in a packet and leave it with the hotel manager as a valuable. You see it is just as well not to put any temptation to robbery with violence in the way of a desperate man. He might think it worth a big risk to get hold of that, if he guessed you had it about you."

"Wal, that seems right, anyhow. Now, what's your idea about the figure for squaring the job?"

"Don't you be in a hurry to talk about squaring. Give him plenty of line first; you know you've got him firmly hooked. When you do get him to that point, though, don't be afraid of opening your mouth."

Mr. Simmonds nodded acquiescence. "I've got my lesson by heart," he said, and, as he spoke, the sullen look returned to his face and

the tone of surly self-repression to his voice. "Good-night!" And, throwing the butt of his smoked-out cigar under the table, he rose and sauntered out of the room.

Thomas Atherton followed the retreating figure with his eyes, the cold, cruel smile still curling the corners of his thin lips. As his companion disappeared through the doorway, he settled himself in his easy-chair and ordered another whisky and soda of a passing waiter. There was something in the quiet malignity of his expression which attracted the attention of even that usually unobservant individual. "A nasty tempered-one, in the corner, that!" was the mode in which his thoughts found utterance to a fellow Ganymede as he retired in quest of the required beverage. "Don't do no manner of credit to his liquor, and bad to meet in a narrow lane of a dark night." Perhaps if the honest fellow could have followed the silent workings of Mr. Atherton's mind, he might have found much to confirm him in his estimate of that gentle man's character.

"Curse him—and her, too!" So ran the current of Thomas Atherton's thoughts. "It's a precious nuisance that this business of our dramatic friend's must of necessity be settled, and his hush-money safe in our pockets, before I explode the other mine.

However, that job once finished, it won't be long before I put a stop to Marie's new romance, I promise her. Whatever billing and cooing there may be shan't last many days. By Gad! when I think of that fellow's arm round her waist and her kisses on his lips, I feel mad enough to throw the chance of bleeding this man Ffrench to the dogs, and give this Lord Ravenscourt his *congé* at once. What a poor shallow fool Simmonds is, after all, and yet he'd turn traitor if he could, I don't doubt. Luckily he's got a full appreciation of his danger if he did so; and the five or ten thousand we ought to get out of the dramatist isn't to be despised, either. I thought at first of making him leave that letter in my custody to-morrow, but it is better as it is. I had better stick to my old plan, for accidents might happen, and it is far too dangerous a thing to have found in one's possession by what might turn out to be the wrong person. No; let him keep it, and carry it, if it pleases him to do so; and if it *should* ever come to the Council's knowledge, why all the worse for him—that's all. In such a case I should just have to know absolutely nothing about the matter. Yes; Mr. Simmonds shall be the ostensible player of the game as long as possible. After all, there's a good deal of pleasure in fooling him

to the top of his bent, and making the man who carries the dynamite fancy it a privilege to do so.

"As for you, Marie Francese, as you are pleased to call yourself, I will have my revenge for all this obstinacy of yours. You shall learn one day to crawl to my feet and beg for the caresses you have refused to me so long. Make the most of your time with your lordly lover; it won't last long."

And with these and such-like musings for his fitting companions, Thomas Atherton went to bed and slept the sleep of the just—a description of repose which he was certainly very far from deserving.

CHAPTER IV.

A TERRIBLE ACCUSATION.

THE morning papers were decidedly pleasant reading for Mr. William Escott on the day following the production of "A Just Revenge." No man is so utterly satiated with success that the almost unanimous approbation of his fellow-mortals fails to stir in his breast delight at the fact of such general appreciation; and Escott perused critique after critique in *Times*, *Daily News*, *Standard*, *Daily Telegraph*, and many another power of the press, with a keen sense of gratification which the remembrance of the public approbation that had accompanied most of his previous dramatic efforts could not appreciably dull. "Unquestionably the author's masterpiece," said one of the gentlemen to whom was entrusted the task of guiding the London playgoer in his search after theatrical pleasures. "Mr. Escott has given us another (perhaps the best so far) of his subtle delineations of character, combined with a most masterly handling of strong human passions for good and for evil," wrote another. "By aid of skilful construction and the gradual

intensifying of the interest until its culmination in the final act, no less than by the artistic power which gives such lifelike individuality to the characters in 'A Just Revenge,' the author scored one of the greatest dramatic successes of the last decade and fairly took his audience by storm," a third informed his readers.

Now, this sort of thing, you know, is exceedingly gratifying; for if any man tells you he is absolutely indifferent to the praise or blame of his critics, you may, without much fear of mistake, set him down as either a sublime egotist or a sublimated Ananias; and as the dramatist, comfortably ensconced in a favourite arm-chair in his work-room, with his morning pipe between his lips, leisurely perused laudatory notice after notice, it is hardly to be wondered at if the strange experience of the previous evening, which had at the time agitated him so profoundly, should for the moment be relegated to a position of less prominence in his thoughts than it had occupied during his return from the theatre. A night's rest, too, had brought fresh strength to the sorely-tried nerves of the evening before, and during the calmer reflections of the morning he had almost succeeded in persuading himself that the whole affair must have been a simple delu-

sion—a mere trick of the imagination—due to the over-excited condition of his brain at the time.

The news of his friend's contemplated marriage—news which Lucy had imparted to him ere they retired to rest—had also interested him not a little. Though he had only had the opportunity of making Madame Francese's acquaintance in the most superficial and, indeed, momentary fashion, he remembered to have been greatly struck at the time by her personal appearance. She had reminded him, somehow, of days long gone by; her face had roused some vague reminiscence of the past. "Who is it she reminds me of?" he had asked himself. "She recalls some one I met years ago, I feel sure of it; but for the life of me I can't remember whom." There had been but a couple of words exchanged, a bow, and they had been parted; but the sense of that indistinct semi-recognition was strong on him now, as his thoughts went back to the Lyric *soirée* where he had met and been introduced to the lady of Lord Ravenscourt's choice.

Then he rose, filled another pipe, and sauntered across the room towards the open French windows that looked upon a dainty, well-kept lawn, encircled by a broad gravel path. What a heavenly morning it was; how

merrily the birds cheeped and twittered in the trees around the house. This was the first morning of his hard-earned holiday, and he stood leaning against the side of the window, luxuriating in the brilliant sunshine. To-morrow, Paris for a few days—then a leisurely journey across to Genoa—then a month's or six weeks' cruise on the blue waters of the Mediterranean—he and Lucy, Ravenscourt and Marie Francese. Such a prospect was not without its charms after the unintermittent toils of the past year.

He looked at his watch. "Nearly eleven o'clock, by Jove!" Lucy had rushed off to Kensington directly after breakfast, just to assure Madame Francese how delighted they were at the idea of having her for a travelling companion. It was about time she was back, and getting on with her preparations for departure by the evening Paris mail. Then he took a fresh newspaper from the pile on the table, and hunted down its columns for another dose of complimentary recognition of his last night's success.

There came a knock at the door, and a servant made his appearance. "Would Mr. Escott see a gentleman who had just called, and was waiting in the hall? He had not given his name, but stated his business was of considerable importance."

"Sounds like a probable appeal to my pocket. Well, I'm not busy, that's one comfort. You can show him in here, Martin," was the reply, as the dramatist put down the paper, and prepared himself to listen to what he expected would be either a plea for help from some obscure and struggling brother in the profession of letters, or perhaps an application by a would-be "walking gentleman" for a chance of inclusion in the cast of one of his forthcoming pieces.

"Please take a seat, sir. What can I do for you?" he said cheerily, as Martin ushered in the visitor. "My man tells me you did not wish to give him your name," he continued, as the servant retired from the room, and closed the door after him.

"At all events," was the reply, given with a slight American twang, "at all events, I reckon I did not do as some folks have done, and give a false one."

William Escott started, and, leaning forward in his chair, scanned his visitor closely. His inspection, however, brought no sign of recognition to his face. So far as he knew, he had never set eyes on his mysterious visitor before, but the remembrance of that episode of the previous evening —the cry which he had successfully brought

himself to dismiss from his thoughts as the simple outcome of his overstrung nerves—came back with redoubled vigour to his mind as the stranger's remarkable answer reached his ears.

At this moment there was a step on the gravel path outside, and Lucy Escott passed through the open French windows into the room. Coming in out of the brilliant sunshine, she did not notice the presence of any one besides her husband, until she was by his side. Then her eyes fell on the mysterious intruder.

"I really beg your pardon, Willie," she said deprecatingly. "I had no idea you had a visitor," with a slight bow in the direction of that individual. "I have just come back from Kensington. It is all settled capitally. She will meet us at the station. But as you are engaged, I will leave you in peace now. I can tell you what arrangements we have made, afterwards."

"Wal, I reckon, ma'am, that our friend here would like to talk over his business with me alone," put in the stranger, rudely enough. "He might kinder find it embarrassing to have a third party present."

If his design was to hasten Mrs. Escott's departure from the room, his speech could hardly have been attended with a more

unsuccessful result. As she turned in astonished silence towards the door, her husband's voice broke in sharply and decisively.

"Please stay and sit down, Lucy," he said, rising and placing a chair for her. "I don't know who you are, sir, or to what I am indebted for this call. But, whatever your business is, it may be freely stated and discussed in this lady's presence."

"Wal, wal," said the stranger, with a sneer. "I guess you know your own affairs best; and if the lady is to stop, I suppose she must. But I fancy it'll prove a mistake."

"Come, sir, come," broke in Escott. "There has been quite enough of this. I shall feel obliged if you will give me your name, and state your business, if you have any, as shortly as you can."

His visitor smiled cynically. "I guess you'll learn my business quite soon enough to please you," he retorted coolly, "even if you can't spot it already. I was at the Regent's Theatre last night and saw a mighty pretty play of yours. Perhaps it's to congratulate you about it that I'm here this morning—perhaps it isn't. I joined in the applause, though, and I reckon you heard me, too; at least as near as I could judge from appearances, you did, *Mr. William Ffrench.*"

The dramatist sprang to his feet and strode across the room towards the speaker.

"What does this mean?" he gasped, his face white to the very lips. "How do you——"

"How do I know?" asked the other, finishing the question for him. "Never mind that at present. I reckon it's about enough for you that I do know. Wal, we'll soon get along now. I suppose you don't mean to deny that you are Mr. William Ffrench, do you? not that it would be much use if you did."

There was a pause for a few seconds, while the man he addressed struggled hard to regain his wonted composure. "I shall neither deny nor admit your statement," he said at last. "That will be a matter for further discussion. Suppose, however, I were the individual you mention. Who are you? And what is it you want of me?"

He cast an anxious glance in the direction of his wife as he spoke. She was sitting looking at him with colourless face and wide dilated eyes. She seemed paralysed, not only with the strangeness of the situation and the apparently incomprehensible bearing of her husband, but with an intuitive perception of what was to follow. A horrible fear was gripping at her heart like the grasp

of a hand of ice. Only that one swift look in her direction, and then her husband turned away again and faced his antagonist resolutely.

"Come, that's more like business now," replied the other. "Wal, Mr. Ffrench, I reckon if I answer the first question and you're as smart a sport as I take you for, you will be about able to see the bottom of the second riddle yourself. My name is Simmonds—John Washington Simmonds—at your service, and the father of Eliza Simmonds. Now, sir, I guess that's lit the gas for you."

Escott shook his head. "You must speak more plainly yet," he said, and the wonted calm had returned by this time to his bearing, the wonted firmness to the tones of his voice. "Your name tells me nothing. I don't remember ever having heard it before. I ask you once more—what do you want of me?"

Mr. Simmonds looked at him admiringly. "That's good," he replied, with a half-surly chuckle; "tarnation good. You've got a face on you that would do credit to an inquisitive baby. I suppose you learnt that sort of thing among the play-actors. So you ain't going to chuck the sponge up till it's a clean knock-out, eh? You carry your chin high, by the

piper! Wal, that shows grit. I like grit, it's in the family. I guess my daughter Eliza liked grit when she married you, eh, William Ffrench?"

A low moan broke from Lucy Escott. Her worst and nameless fears were to be realised, then. Merciful heavens! It surely could not be true. That it was possible to have been so deceived in any man—oh, it was ridiculous! One read of such things in novels or saw them enacted on the stage, but in real life—happening to her own self—it would be unheard of—monstrous. Why did not her husband ring the bell, and have this madman, for he could be nothing else, turned out of the house, instead of standing there with that extraordinary expression of mingled curiosity and horror on his white face?

There was silence while a man might count a score, and then Escott spoke again, but, though his voice was quiet and controlled, its tones sounded so strange and altered that Lucy hardly recognised it.

"Be good enough to proceed," he said. "I admit nothing. Let us have the whole charge in plain words, and then—your proofs."

Mr. John Washington Simmonds took a cigar out of an open box on the table, struck a match, and leisurely proceeded to light his booty. It was a silent exclamation of *væ*

victis. Then he, in his turn, glanced at the unhappy woman whose little piteous cry of agony had greeted his last utterances. Her silent, stony misery seemed for a moment to touch even his callous heart. "I guess I'm sorry for you, ma'am," he said. "I thought and said you'd be better away when this game was played. However, as you've heard so much, there won't be much more harm done if you hear the rest. The fact is, that our friend here married my daughter, Eliza Simmonds, in July, 1874, at a registrar's office in New York—I've a copy of the certificate, ma'am—where she had gone to attend high school and qualify for a governess—she was a spry learner, was Liz. I don't say but what I owe him something for playing straight with a silly young gal, whose father was away down in Nevada, and who had no one to look after her. There ain't no manner of doubt about this show, for I've got a certificated copy of the marriage register in my pocket-book. Wal, to cut a long story short, whether he got tired of her or what the reason was, I don't know—you'd better ask him yourself—but only ten months after, my gentleman makes a clean bolt of it to England, gets some sham notice of his death put into the papers, and tries a fresh start as Mr. William Escott. Now I think

you've about got the hang of the matter, ma'am. You can ask him if he denies the truth of all I've said."

During the progress of this speech the dramatist's face had been shaded from observation by his hand. When Simmonds ceased speaking, Escott looked his antagonist once more fairly in the eyes, and Lucy, even in the extremity of her horror and distress, was struck by the predominant expression on his features of intense, questioning curiosity.

"Be kind enough to spare this lady the additional pain of hearing you address her, Mr. Simmonds," he said. "I repeat, in answer to your last remark, that I admit nothing. It may be perfectly true that some Mr. William Ffrench did marry your daughter, as you assert. All that, however, has nothing to do with me, until you can identify me with that fortunate individual. May I ask how you propose to set about it?"

"There won't be much difficulty in doing that," was the reply, given sharply and in more angry tones, for Mr. John Washington Simmonds was beginning to lose his temper, in the face of the other's quiet, self-possessed manner. "There won't be much difficulty in doing that. To begin with, you were recognised last night by a mutual acquaintance,

and if it comes to a court of law, I can put in documentary proofs to which you can't make no more answer than a toad could make to a steam-roller. Look here, my friend, you've asked a power of questions and I've answered them pretty freely, but I ain't at all the sort of man to call my trumps over to you, and give you the clean run of my cards. You've had a rare fine time of it for the last ten years, but the game is up now, and, as you've lost it, I'd like to know after what fashion you propose to pay the stakes."

The expression of intense curiosity had faded from Escott's countenance, and was replaced by a look of determined but hopeless resolve.

"Be good enough to leave us for the present, Mr. Simmonds," he said, after a moment's pause. "I may tell you, you are mistaken. To use your own metaphor, the game is not finished yet; but I have not had time to sort my hand." He took his watch from his pocket, and glanced at it. "At four o'clock this afternoon, if you like, we will continue it, and, if I lose, the stakes shall be duly paid. No," he added, reading the American's unspoken thought, "you need not fear *that*. I shall be here to receive you. You may watch the house, or even remain

in it, if you choose; but it will be unnecessary. Good morning."

As the door closed behind his departing visitor, the pluck and determination which had carried him through that terrible interview seemed suddenly to have deserted William Escott; he sank into a chair at his writing-table, and buried his face in his hands. Minute after minute passed away, and still silent, motionless, despairing misery reigned supreme, while, as if in mockery of their pain, the glorious July sunshine streamed into the room through the open windows, and the air quivered with the full, sweet note of the thrush on the smooth, green lawn outside.

Then there was a light touch on his arm, and he raised his head to find his wife kneeling by his side.

Never since he first set eyes on Lucy Escott had the exquisite beauty of the woman he loved appeared to better advantage than at that moment. The pallor of the delicate face only enhanced the charm of those glorious hazel eyes, dilated in anxious interrogation that seemed trying to search his very soul. The tremor of the sweet lips, the wild abandonment of her pose of supplication, pleaded with a silent eloquence few men could have witnessed unmoved.

"Willie, dear Willie!" she said in a

piteous, tremulous whisper that thrilled him to the heart. "I have loved you so dearly—we have been so happy—I cannot believe it, in spite of all those dreadful proofs he spoke of. Ah, no! you could never have done this; it is impossible. There is some terrible misconception—is it not so?—something that you did not wish to explain before that horrible man—some mystery that commands your silence. Ah, Willie! only one word, I implore you. I do not seek to know what you may wish to keep hidden in your breast. I can trust you, if you wish it, my darling. I do not wish to probe the mystery, if mystery there be. Only one word to tell me what I am. Oh! Willie, fancy!—our little Phyllis a nameless—no, I cannot say it. It is not, it cannot be true. Tell me, dear, with your own lips—what am I? Only one word, Willie; which is it? Wife or mistress?"

Her voice died away, till at the last word it was all but inaudible; and she knelt there, gazing silently into his face, awaiting the announcement of her doom.

As he looked down into those lustrous eyes, William Escott silently registered a vow in heaven—a vow that no peril to himself, no fear of a fate worse even than that of death itself, should, if the need of such sacri-

fice arose, ever stand for an instant between him and the honour of the woman whose trembling fingers clasped his own.

"Wife! come what may," he cried, as he gathered her tenderly into his strong, protecting arms, where she nestled like a tired bird. "You may dismiss your fears on that head, my pet. Your good name and that of our little one shall stand untarnished 'though the heavens fall.'"

The soft lips sought his own, the passionate clasp of the clinging, encircling arms spoke her mute thanks for that assurance.

"Then that man's tale was false?" she murmured.

"As far as I am concerned, yes!" was the reply.

"I knew there was some strange mystery I could not fathom," she cried; "but your manner frightened me so. It seemed so inexplicable—you would deny nothing, would not give that man the lie."

He shivered in her embrace. "There lies the danger," he said. "*I could not.*"

"Could not?" she echoed, raising her head and striving to look into his averted face. "But you are not the man he spoke of—you are not this William Ffrench?"

His head drooped helplessly on his hands. "*I cannot prove that,*" he answered in so

low a tone that she almost failed to catch the words. There was a moment's pause, then—

"You must trust me, darling," he said; and once more his eyes met hers frankly and steadfastly. "You must trust me unquestioningly and implicitly. Now, you must leave me to think matters out. We have a great danger to face this afternoon. If I conquer, all will be well; if I fail, I promise you that, at all events—at any cost—your honour shall be saved."

She looked up at him, hesitatingly at first, then with growing confidence in her glance. "Yes," she said; "I can trust you; I *will* trust you—in all things. Kiss me—my husband." Then the door closed behind her, and William Escott was alone.

He rose from his chair and paced the room, up and down; up and down—first with hasty, feverish strides, then with slower, meditative step, as by degrees he began to succeed in controlling, sifting, and classifying the chaos of thoughts that came surging up in interminable and bewildering succession.

"Oh, my God!" he cried, "have I not been punished enough for my boyish credulity—for the one false step that has ruined my life? Must that foolish act be so fearfully visited on these beloved heads? What a situation! What a ghastly choice is before

me, unless—— Bah! regrets are useless. I *must* face it, and face it alone. Thank Heaven, she can trust me still! It will spare her needless pain. To tell her all now would only be to burden her with my anxieties, to make her share in my hideous dilemma—though I know well it would be but little of a dilemma to her loving, self-sacrificing heart. No; better far that she should not learn the truth until the inevitable moment comes.

"But is it, then, inevitable?" So ran the current of his thoughts. "It looks like an attempt at blackmail; and, if so, even if I cannot defeat it, it would be worth while to buy this fellow's silence at any cost. Let me think. The chief point is how he came to identify me with the man who married his daughter. Yes; that is the weak spot. That is where he lost his temper, and lied into the bargain. Recognised by a mutual friend, was I, Mr. Simmonds? That was a palpable revoke, my good man. The 'documentary evidence' was mere bluffing, no doubt. The mischief is that I dare not face publicity, or else I could afford to snap my fingers at the whole affair. How *did* he come to identify me? There is only one source in the world from which he could have gleaned that knowledge, and that—— Great heavens! can

that be the solution of the mystery? It cannot be. Treachery in such a quarter as that would be too hideous a risk to run. And yet what other explanation can there be? By the Lord Harry! if it be so, there might be a chance for me yet, if I could only see how to utilise it. Ah! if only the playwright's resources could avail me here. And why shouldn't they? Suppose this were some drama—no bad one, either—how should I end it?"

He sat down at his writing-table, and bent his head on his hand in absorbing thought, as he had done many and many a time before when wrestling with a knotty difficulty in the construction of some ingenious plot.

Presently the dramatist started to his feet with an exclamation of satisfaction.

"I have it," he cried. "It will be a bold stroke, but surely worth the attempt. A plagiarism, no doubt, though an excusable one. If it succeeds, I shall be tempted to tell Sardou what a deep debt of gratitude I shall owe him."

He rang the bell, and, scribbling a few words on a sheet of paper, handed it to the servant who answered his summons.

"Have that cablegram despatched at once," he said, "and let the reply be brought to me the instant it arrives."

CHAPTER V

BLUFFED!

It was indeed fortunate for Lucy Escott at this momentous crisis of her fate that hers was a nature of abnormal trustfulness in those she loved—a womanly idiosyncrasy becoming indeed rarer day by day in these times of feminine self-assertion, but still not altogether so obsolete as cynics are wont to aver. There are women yet—thank Heaven for them!—whose whole existence, when they love, becomes absorbed, as it were, in the more virile entity to which they cling; tender, womanly parasites for whom love goes hand in hand with childlike, unquestioning confidence in the man to whom their heart is given, with implicit, unswerving belief in the wisdom of his decisions, and with a simple, unreasoning trust which, alas! too often blinds them till too late to their idol's feet of clay. Miracles of towering feminine intellect they may not be; but adorably tender, life-sweetening helpmates to soothe and render man's toil endurable—yes. The mischief is, that so frequently it is the utterly unappreciative, the disgust-

ingly selfish and tyrannous, the "common or garden" cad (there are cads in every rank) who manages to secure these matrimonial prizes. Your kindly, affectionate, high-principled, unselfish man is almost invariably partnered with an exacting, self-asserting Xantippe who halves his joys and doubles his sorrows. If marriages are made in Heaven, the principle of selection, it must be confessed, seems sometimes a curious one.

I do not for a moment mean to pretend that when Mrs. Escott left her husband's presence on that eventful morning she did so with a mind entirely at ease, with a heart as light as the one she carried in her breast a few hours previously, or without a feeling of anxious curiosity and dread as intense as it was natural. But it is undoubtedly a fact that her trust in his honour and in her own good name remained unshaken by their visitor's assertions and accusations, once the man she loved had denied their truth. That he had some good and sufficient reason for withholding for the moment, even from her, the explanation that would clear up the mystery that shrouded his apparently doubtful attitude towards this Mr. Simmonds in the face of that individual's charges, she was content to believe, feeling assured that when,

in her beloved husband's judgment, the time was ripe for the disclosure he now withheld, the justification of his present reticence would be fully apparent. It was not for the woman he loved to aggravate, by such a thing as distrust, or even by a desire to slake her curiosity, the difficulties and dangers that beset him; and that there was danger—imminent and terrible—to be faced, his parting words had told her. Yes; if doing so could help him in his hour of need, she would "contain her soul in patience" willingly enough.

And he? Will he justify her noble, loving trust? Is he really the unfortunate victim of an inexplicable misapprehension which, for some unknown cause, he is unable to refute? or is he in very truth guilty of the villainous treachery of which his accuser has produced such striking proofs — treachery towards a loving, confiding woman? The former, let us hope, and not the latter; for, to such a nature as Lucy Escott's, so terrible a disillusionment would be worse than death itself.

Punctually at four o'clock, Mr. John Washington Simmonds rang the front door-bell of Cheshunt House, and was shown into the same room as that in which the morning's interview had taken place. During the

interval which had elapsed since his first visit he had returned to the Métropole with the intention of conferring with his accomplice as to the amount of hush-money they should demand; for that the afternoon would witness his complete triumph and the sight of his recreant son-in-law pleading for mercy and for terms of peace, he never doubted for an instant. But Atherton was not to be found. He had left word that he had been called away on important business, and hardly expected to be back before six or seven. So Mr. Simmonds had recuperated his strength with a sumptuous luncheon, not forgetting to pour out a fairly copious libation to the success of his enterprise. A bottle of "Roederer" had helped to paint the future in somewhat roseate hues, and, under its hopeful influence, he made his second entry into William Escott's workroom, buoyed up with the expectation of an easy and bloodless victory.

He found the dramatist leaning with his back against the mantelpiece, placidly smoking a cigarette. Something in the quiet, conscious ease of his look and bearing imparted a decided chill to the visitor's sense of triumph; perhaps it was due merely to the gradual evaporation of a little of his champagne-born courage, but he certainly

felt a distinct lessening of the previous half-hour's overwhelming confidence.

"Looks as if he'd got a big trump up his sleeve," he thought to himself. "I guess there'll be a bit of a squeeze yet. Wal, if it's a case of bluffing, I'm ready to see him out. Anyhow he's got to lead off and we'll soon see what his hand's worth."

"I see you recognise punctuality as one of the prominent virtues, Mr. Simmonds," said Escott airily, taking two or three rapid farewell puffs at his cigarette before flinging the end carelessly into the empty grate behind him. "I am glad of it, as the time I can spare you is but short."

The other looked at him sharply. "Keeps a beautiful stiff upper lip over the job," he thought. "Undeniable style he'd have for a 'euchre' party down Nevada way. The only thing about these pretty players is that the gas escapes so quick when they're fairly collared. We'll get to the point as soon as ever you darn please, so far as I'm concerned," he said aloud, in reply to Escott's last speech.

"Before we proceed any further, Mr. Simmonds," rejoined the latter, "would you mind letting me know the source from which you derived the information which led to your visit this morning? It would

simplify matters, I think, very much if you did."

"I dare say it would—for you," answered the American. "Want to see what trumps I hold, eh? No, sir; that cock won't fight. It is quite enough for you at present to know that I have got the information; that it is true; and that I mean to use it."

"Well, Mr. Simmonds," was the reply. "I may as well tell you, to start with, that you have made an egregious mistake in the identity of the man you are seeking. I never married your daughter, nor has she any claim upon me."

"I reckon you'll not find that so easy to prove in a court of law, my friend," said the American. "And that's what you'll have to do before you get out of this mess. I understand that was another wife of yours I saw this morning. Wal, your taste is good, I'm free to admit, but your ideas are too patriarchal for this one-horse old country. Utah's the spot for a man of your views. I'm told they're tarnation down on bigamy this side of the 'herring-pond.'"

Escott kept his temper admirably. If it was his antagonist's aim to irritate him into recklessness, the attempt was a total failure. "I tell you again, you are labouring under a terrible mistake," he said. "I am *not* your

son-in-law, and I can prove it, if necessary, when the time comes. I beg you, most earnestly, for your own sake, to accept my present statement as the truth, and let the matter drop here on my assurance. Believe me, it will be the wisest thing you ever did."

John Washington Simmonds laughed drily, and his coarse features brightened up considerably with renewed confidence. "I guess your cards can't be over and above good," he said, "or you'd have played a better one than that."

At this moment there came a knock at the door, and a servant entered with a cablegram. Mr. Simmonds, glancing down at the salver as the man presented it to his master, saw that the large white envelope bore the stamp of the Anglo-American Telegraph Company.

"Come, come," he said. "Let's have an end of this sparring. My time is just as valuable as yours, though I didn't gas quite so much about it a bit back; it'll be much better to come to the point at once, and have done with it. I've got you clean dead licked. You talked of wanting time to sort your hand; I don't believe you had so much as one blessed picture-card to look at on the deal. Why don't you own up like a man? I don't want to be hard on you, you bet; but I must have some of the good things going

about. Look, now! You seem to be pretty comfortable as you are, and I'm the last man to part folks that are happy. Say! This is a lone hand, and my gal knows nothing so far. I'll square the job for ten thousand pounds, and let bygones be bygones."

A stern, hard, merciless expression darkened Escott's face as he listened quietly to this cool proposition.

"I see I was not mistaken in my first reading of your character, Mr. Simmonds," he remarked composedly. "As, however, personalities are unnecessary, I will merely content myself with declining your most enticing offer with thanks. As a matter of fact, I feel tolerably certain that you will never make any application to the law courts; I fancy you will find that a shade too risky. No; you have played your game and lost it. Do you guess what this is?" he asked carelessly, twirling the still unopened cablegram between his finger and thumb. "No? Well, I'll tell you. I asked you just now for the source of the information you favoured us with this morning. To tell you the truth, I hardly wonder at your declining to give it. It occurred to me, after you left us, that the only way in which you could possibly have fancied you had discovered that Mr. William Ffrench was living in London under the

name of Escott was *by obtaining access to the documents of a certain secret society in New York,* and that you had been betraying their secrets for the furtherance of your own ends. At the first blush I confess the ghastly fate you were courting by so doing seemed to be a sufficient deterrent to such an act for any one in possession of their senses; but, on second thoughts, so certain did I feel of the correctness of my surmise, that I sent a message through the wires to a certain personage in New York. This is the reply. I am wondering at this moment what I shall do with it."

One glance at that terror-drawn face, as it changed during this speech from the ruddiness of health to white, then to grey, and finally to a livid, leaden hue, was sufficient to tell that the thrust had gone home—home to the very hilt. The engineer was "hoist by his own petard" with a vengeance. The one vulnerable spot in Mr. John Washington Simmonds's armour—a spot so seemingly undetectable that Atherton himself had never taken into account the possibility of its discovery—had been marked and attained in the first assault, turning victory into defeat, and triumph into deadly, sickening fear; for Simmonds knew full well what traitor's punishment it was to which his act

had made him amenable—both him and his accomplice—if the whole truth had been guessed in New York on receipt of Escott's message. He knew, I say, what his fate was like to be now, and he showed that knowledge in his ghastly, livid face.

The dramatist paused for a moment to note the effect of his last, telling speech, and then, sure of winning now, went on in quiet, incisive tones :—

"I see you know what that message was, and can give a pretty correct guess at the contents of this reply to it. Now, Mr. Simmonds, listen to me. If I open this message, I am bound by oath to fulfil the instructions it may contain. They may be—mind I only say 'may be,'—to keep you in sight until the arrival of the individual charged with a certain decree of the *Supreme Council.* In that case, you can imagine what chance of escape you have. On the other hand, the message may contain a mere notification of your innocence and of my mistake. You best know which it is of the two. Now if I burn it unopened, and in ignorance of its contents, I violate no oath, and—well, you will have a little start. It is for you to choose. Say; which shall it be? I may have become imbued with English ideas on sport, and I must confess that rather like the

quarry to have a little law if it is to be hunted. Come! you know best. Which is it, Mr. Simmonds, innocent or guilty? Is this cablegram to be opened or burned?"

He struck a match as he spoke, and lit a taper on the writing-table.

There was not much need to ask. He had his answer in the face of the unhappy wretch before him. The terrors of the man-hunt, the gnawing anxiety of that never-ceasing effort to escape, that you and I, reader, have seen before on a nobler and an innocent face, were plainly enough visible in all their silent eloquence to William Escott's gaze.

"Burn it, for God's sake—burn it, and give me a chance!" came in a wild hoarse whisper to his ears.

He held the unopened cablegram to the taper, and dropped the ashes into the grate.

"Take your chance, then," he said, and pointed to the door. In another instant he was alone.

As William Escott heard the hall-door close behind his departing visitor, he sank into the chair beside him with a sigh of intense relief—a sigh that told how severe had been the tension on his nerves of that last half-hour, and how welcome its relaxation was to him.

"Thank God for that escape!" he muttered. "It was a bold stroke, indeed, and it deserved to win; but the consequences of failure would have been terrible to contemplate. I don't think I need have any fear that Mr. John Washington Simmonds will ever willingly put himself prominently before the public, or invoke the assistance of the law-courts to establish his claim. Poor devil! the terrors of his imagination will make his one aim that of burying himself in some distant corner of the world. I should hardly have liked to have tried my experiment if he had not been convicted out of his own mouth as a blackmailer, and if Lucy's happiness had not been at stake. I wonder if this really means safety; I suppose it does, for he would hardly dare to confide the fact of such dangerous treachery to any one. And yet—no, it would be impossible, I should think. As it was, even with the conviction that his secret was inviolable, the man must have been mad to run such a risk as he did. Well, I'll go and put poor Lucy's mind at rest with the news of Mr. Simmonds's retreat, and the collapse of his claims. I will stop at that, though, till the next few days have convinced me we *are* safe, and given her courage to bear the whole truth. By Jove! what a load this

afternoon's business has lifted off my mind. Upon my soul, I should like to tell Sardou how much I owe him, if I see him in Paris." And Escott ran upstairs to cheer his wife with the tidings of their late visitor's discomfiture.

Let him not be too exultant yet. The meshes of a net he does not guess of will be tightening round him before many suns have risen and set. He has a heavier conflict still before him ere safety is won—a conflict in which he will have to face not only a stronger adversary far than the one his brains have vanquished to-day, but what will unnerve him more—far more—a friend.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DUPLICATE MESSAGE.

If a load had been lifted that afternoon from William Escott's mind it must have been deposited, its bulk considerably added to during the transference, on the shoulders of Mr. John Washington Simmonds.

At the close of his interview with the dramatist, our American friend did not wait for any pampered menial to show him to the door, but made his exit from Cheshunt House with the most unceremonious expedition. Nor was this on account of any republican dislike to aristocratic formalities, but simply because, to use a colloquial expression, he was in the "very deuce and all" of a hurry. To tell the truth, it would have been pretty evident even to the most unobservant person he chanced to meet in his rapid course in the direction of the Swiss Cottage, that Mr. Simmonds's equanimity was considerably upset. The terrified expression was still in his eyes, the livid pallor still on his cheeks, as, jumping into the first hansom he encountered, he shouted, "Métropole Hotel!

and drive like h—, do you hear?" to the startled cabby.

As he was whirled along the road to town he kept the recording angel busily engaged. There were few greater proficients in the art of fluent and varied blasphemy even among the Nevada mining community than Mr. John Washington Simmonds when he really let himself "go free," as he did on this occasion. He cursed them all round—his late antagonist, for so completely turning the tables on him; Atherton, for having given him such disastrous advice on the previous evening; and himself, for his egregious folly in fitting such a noose around his own neck. Then he tried to map out his immediate course of procedure. Flight? Of course he must fly, using every artifice his cunning could suggest to baffle pursuit, until he could reach some distant spot where he could count on a chance of safety from the far-reaching grasp of the accursed "Society" whose vengeance his own reckless stupidity and Escott's appeal had provoked. "Curse him!" he muttered. "I guess that cablegram's lit the gas for them right slap. They'll have looked matters up and missed that infernal letter; and that cunning devil Ffrench's wire will have given them the clue as to who it was that took it. Great Scott! what a mess I'm in! I reckon

I'll have to travel pretty smart! I've got a start, that's one thing, and I'll do my level best to leave precious little scent for 'em to follow up. I can force some dollars from that smug-faced sweep, Atherton, to-night, and make tracks. He daren't button up his pocket, or I'll split on his part of the performance. Moses! what a dry-rotted fool I've been!"

It was nearly six o'clock by the time Simmonds reached the Hotel. On inquiry, he ascertained that Atherton had not yet returned, and, leaving word at the office that he wished to see that gentleman immediately on his arrival, he secured a Bradshaw, and proceeded to his room to pack up a few necessaries and decide on the route he should take and the means he should employ to effectually puzzle any possible pursuer.

He was engaged in bundling his scanty stock of clothes and linen into the recesses of his travelling bag, when the door of his bedroom opened and his companion entered.

Atherton started when he saw the preparations for departure.

"What the deuce are you up to, man?" he asked, closing the door, locking it, and quietly dropping the key into his pocket. "Are you thinking of making tracks with

the plunder? I don't think you'll find *that* a good game to play with me, my friend."

"Plunder?" said the other, looking up with a queer expression on his still pallid features. "You're welcome to all that, and then you wouldn't be over and above rich, I can tell you. The game's not such a pretty one as I fancied—not for me, at all events—and I'm going to make myself as scarce as a welcher on settling day, I am; and what's more, I guess I'll trouble you for the dollars to scoot with. You can keep my share of the plunder against them."

Atherton's dark brow contracted ominously. "Speak plainer, you cowardly fool," he exclaimed. "What do you mean? Have you seen your precious son-in-law? What the devil has frightened you like this?

"*He* has," was the reply. "I called and showed him up pretty smartly, as I thought, this morning. He looked fairly nailed to the wall, I can tell you—said he'd admit nothing or deny nothing, but wanted to know how I'd spotted him."

"Well?" asked Atherton.

"Wal, I just gave him your precious dose of lies—swore he'd been recognised last night and all that; and, the beauty, he just nodded his head and seemed to suck it all down sweetly enough. Then he asked for

an hour or two to cipher the whole show out, and I took it he was just going to tot up how much he could spare to square the job."

"Well?" asked Atherton, again, the evil look in his eyes growing darker and darker.

"I agreed to look in again this afternoon, and by the time I did so the backboard was out of the cart and the sand spilt to a pretty tune."

"He'd not made away with himself? Hang it, man! answer me, can't you?" said the other, anxiously, as the thought struck him vividly that, even at that moment, perhaps, Marie was clear of his own clutches and free to marry the man of her choice.

Simmonds looked up in some surprise. "You seem tarnation keen about his health," he said. "No; if it had been only that it wouldn't have been so bad a look-out for me as it is. He'd done worse than that. *He'd cabled for instructions about me to the Supreme Council!*"

"Impossible!"

"Anything but impossible. I wish it was, I know. He had guessed how it was I came to spot him as William Ffrench, and sent a message through the wires. Of course it made the whole thing plain to them and showed them what had become of the missing papers. The answer came while I

was there. I don't want a knife between my ribs like poor Joe Doolan."

"Look here, Simmonds, you might know by this time I'm not a good one to try and humbug with such lies as that. Do you think I can't see through your little game? Do you imagine your cock-and-bull story will enable you to get off with William Ffrench's hush-money intact?"

"I reckon I'm telling you gospel truth," was the reply. "I tell you the answer came while I was there."

"Did you read it?"

"No; but it wasn't very difficult to guess what that cablegram said. He just told me what he'd done, and then gave me my choice. 'If I open and read it,' says he, 'I'm bound by my oath to follow instructions; but if I burn it unopened—well, of course I've no instructions to go by, and it's no business of mine to keep you in sight. You know best,' he says, 'what you've got to expect for betraying the Society's secrets.' And so I did, well enough; he was right there."

"Well?"

"Wal, it wouldn't take any one but a born idiot long to make up his mind over such a business as that. I could get a start and be at the other end of nowhere before those

devils could get on my track. I said 'burn away,' of course, and just scooted."

Atherton stood for a moment in thought. "It's impossible," he said again, after a short silence. "It can't be, I tell you. The Council dissolved last month and won't sit again for a fortnight. You've just caught a Tartar, and your son-in-law has cleverer brains than I gave him credit for—that's about the figure. Let me look at you," and he scanned the other's features closely and scrutinisingly. "Yes," he said at last, "you've had a fright—there's no mistake about that. How the deuce can we get to the bottom of this? Let me think. I have it!" he exclaimed, after cudgelling his brains for some little time. "I have it! Did you notice what line the message he burnt came by? Was it the Anglo-American or the——"

"The Anglo-American," broke in Simmonds, who had been watching his companion for the last few minutes in utter bewilderment. "What's the use of asking such questions? You don't catch me wasting any more time this way. Let me have some money and start on my travels. You'd better, you know: a word from me, and your boiler'd be burst as well as mine."

Thomas Atherton took a few seconds to

review the situation. Here was a fine opportunity of getting rid of Mr. John Washington Simmonds for good and all. Should he utilise it? or might that gentleman still prove of sufficient use to warrant the retention of his services? The latter, certainly, Mr. Atherton decided. Simmonds's tale had opened his eyes to the dangers of the double-edged weapons he was wielding. It might be as well, after all, to carry a scapegoat about with him.

"Look here," he said, "the foundation for your fears can easily be tested. There is no such frantic hurry for a couple of hours, at all events. If at the end of that time you still want to 'scoot,' as you call it, I won't stand in your way, and you shall have five hundred dollars to help you to escape. Is it a bargain? Yes? Put on your hat and come downstairs again, then. We'll make some inquiries that'll soon settle the matter, one way or the other."

Making his way to the glass cage-like emporium of information in the hall of the hotel, Atherton asked where the office of the Anglo-American Telegraph Company nearest to the Hampstead postal district was situated, and, on obtaining the required address, shoved his wondering companion into a hansom, jumped in beside him, and desired the cab-

man to drive to N—— Street, St. John's Wood, as rapidly as possible.

As the horse started off at a smart trot up Northumberland Avenue, Simmonds managed to overcome his astonishment at this proceeding sufficiently to ask the meaning of this new move. The simplicity of the reply made him wonder the idea had not occurred to him before.

"I'm going to try and get a copy of the telegram you saw burned," answered the more astute scoundrel. "Now do you understand?"

The telegraph office was on the point of being closed for the night as they drew up to the pavement before it. Atherton jumped out of the cab, made his way to the swing doors, and walked up to the counter with his usual air of quiet assurance.

"It's lucky I got here in time," he said to one of the clerks; "I see you are just going to shut up. Is it too late to get a message repeated from New York this evening?"

"I'm afraid it is, sir," was the unsuspecting reply; "but I can get it through first thing in the morning. What message do you refer to?"

"Oh, this one," said Atherton, pulling out his letter-case, then, uttering an exclamation of disgust, eagerly searching pocket after

pocket. "Hang it all!" he continued. "I must have mislaid it or left it behind, or something. However, you'll have a copy of it here, of course. Just look it up, and bring it to me for a moment, will you? Cablegram—this afternoon, addressed 'Escott.' There are a couple of words I'm not certain about."

He certainly did it admirably, though his heart was beating so loudly in his excitement that he almost thought the clerk would hear it. "What if Simmonds were right, after all?" he reflected. "If it were so, it might be better for me to cut and run too. The truth might leak out at any moment, once the Council's suspicions were aroused." And yet there was no vestige of a tremor in his voice, no shadow of doubt in his eyes, no particle of hesitation in the easy confidence of his manner. The man he addressed opened a drawer, and, after a momentary search among the papers it contained, separated one from the rest, and, without the slightest tinge of suspicion entering his brain, laid it before him on the counter.

It was a copy of the burned message. As Atherton's glance fell on and devoured it, it needed all his self-control to check the start of victorious triumph which the perusal prompted.

"Ah, yes, that's it," he remarked quietly. "It's the 'ten' and the 'gross' I'm not certain about. You had better get a repeat first thing in the morning. How much will it be?"

The man told him, and Atherton handed him the money. "I'm afraid I must have lost the original," he said, in unconcerned fashion. "Just make out another copy of the message, will you? I suppose you have to keep this for reference? Thanks," he continued, as the clerk unsuspectingly complied with his request. "I am sorry to have given you so much trouble. Good evening." And placing his cunningly acquired booty in his letter-case, Thomas Atherton made his exit from the telegraph office, and rejoined his anxiously impatient comrade outside.

"Walk on quietly with me, Simmonds," he said in a low voice. "One can't be too careful about exciting suspicion, and this has been a ticklish job. Here is a copy of your precious cablegram. Take it quietly, now, and keep your wits about you." And he placed the slip of paper in the other's trembling fingers.

For an instant Mr. John Washington Simmonds's feverish excitement caused the words of the message to dance wildly before

his eyes. Then they seemed to steady themselves a little, and he read as follows :—

"*From* MOLTON, *New York, to* ESCOTT, *Cheshunt House, Hampstead, London.*

"Heldon offers ten per cent. on gross receipts for rights of 'A Just Revenge.'"

The reader turned towards his companion in blind bewilderment. "What the h— is the meaning of this?" he asked breathlessly.

Atherton gave an airy little laugh. "Come back and have some dinner," he said. "What does this mean? Well, that it's a good thing you've got me to take care of you, for one thing. Don't you understand the mystery, man alive? Your clever son-in-law played a sweet game, and fairly bluffed you with an old stage trick of Victorien Sardou's. It's just as clear as mud to me. The possibility of your having obtained the clue to his identity by getting access to the Council's papers (remembering, as he does, a certain letter of his, now happily in our possession) occurred to him. It is neck or nothing with him, so he decides on playing the bold game. He sends a cable to this man Molton, who, I expect, is his New York agent—a cable that necessitates a telegraphic reply. When that reply comes he has

worked you up with a neat cock-and-bull story, grounded on his suspicions, to such an extent that your fears turn this innocent, harmless business message into a death warrant, or something of the sort; and then, by a clever turn, he makes the destruction of the evidence of his trick the very act which seems to give you a chance to escape from the terrors of your own imagination. By Jove! I give him credit for brains, anyhow. The dodge pretty nearly succeeded—at all events, as far as you were concerned."

If Mr. John Washington Simmonds's language an hour or so ago had been rich in employment for the recording angel, that which graced the leisure moments of his drive back to dinner must have necessitated the labours of an angelic shorthand staff of reporters to do full justice to his efforts.

"When I tackle my gentleman to-morrow," he said to Atherton, as they sat down to table, "I reckon he'll find the market's on the boom, and prices have gone up considerable—pretty much a hundred per cent., in fact. It'll be twenty thousand pounds—not ten—in the morning. Jehoshaphat! that young devil has frightened a dozen years off my life."

But Mr. Simmonds never paid another visit to Hampstead. When he came down

to breakfast the next morning, he found Thomas Atherton pacing the hall impatiently.

"Look at that," said the latter, thrusting a paper into the new-comer's hand. "Your cursed stupidity yesterday means a week's delay and a long journey," and he pointed to a paragraph among the items of gossip in a certain usually well-informed Society journal :—

"Mr. William Escott, whose latest successful effort has sent seats at the Regent's Theatre to an unheard-of premium, left London for Paris last night, *en route* for Genoa, where he will embark on Lord Ravenscourt's new schooner yacht *Almira*, for a month's cruise in the Mediterranean. Mrs. Escott and Madame Francese, who accompanied the dramatist and his wife, will also be among the party on board. We heartily wish Mr. Escott pleasant weather for his well-earned holiday."

"I'll take the job you bungled so into my own hands this time," said Atherton. "And what's more, I'll make the attack in a new quarter. I'm going to stop Lord Ravenscourt's love-making to a pretty tune, to begin with. If you like to try conclusions with Mr. William Ffrench a second time, you can do so—after I've finished. We'll start for Genoa to-night."

CHAPTER VII.

A DAMNING DOCUMENT.

"YES; we only got in here at half-past four this morning," said Lord Ravenscourt to our friend Escott, some ten days after the events narrated in the last chapter. "Just nicked you off neatly, eh? It was a magnificent run right away from Gib., I can tell you. I'd no idea she had so much pace. I really believe we might have won a flag or two on the South Coast this season; I've a great mind to give her a try with the cracks next year. What sort of a time have you had since you left town, Willie?"

"Capital," was the reply. "You idle men can't really appreciate a holiday like we sons of toil. As a matter of fact, I believe I should have enjoyed anything after the incessant hard work of the last twelve months. We had immense fun in Paris, and had considerable difficulty in tearing ourselves away, so as to get a couple of days at Monte Carlo, on our way here."

"Well, Lucy and you, between you, seem to have fairly knocked poor Marie up. How-

ever, twenty-four hours of the Mediterranean sea breezes on board the *Almira* will soon put matters right again."

"I don't think you need have any lover-like anxieties, my dear fellow," laughed the other. "There's nothing very serious in a sick headache, after all. Lucy is upstairs looking after her, and your beloved one will be as fresh as paint to-morrow morning. Anyhow, it gives me the chance of a quiet after-luncheon cigar with you, which wouldn't have been the case if you'd had the opportunity of loafing about the 'City of Palaces with the 'emphatic She'—she in capital letters."

The two friends were enjoying a peaceful and digestive weed on the balcony of a comfortable private sitting-room in the Hôtel des Quatre Nations at Genoa, where the Escotts and Madame Francese had arrived an hour or two back in due fulfilment of the *rendez-vous* given by their host of the *Almira* on that memorable evening at the Regent's Theatre a fortnight before. Below them, in the distance, lay extended the magnificent harbour, with its forest of tapering masts quivering in the broiling afternoon sun, while out beyond the Mole the deep blue of the tideless sea faded away into the heat-mists that hid the horizon.

"There she lies," remarked the *Almira's* owner, pointing out a beautiful schooner-yacht nearly opposite the spot where they were sitting, the well-known burgee and white St. George's ensign of the R.Y.S. rendering her identification among the mass of shipping an easy task. "They were uncommonly polite, and gave us moorings alongside the Guard-ship. Don't it make you long to feel yourself afloat, and drinking in the delicious sea-air? Can't you picture to yourself the delights of a comfortable deck-chair, a large pipe, and a tumbler of hock and seltzer, with a big lump of ice tinkling musically against the rim?"

"Yes; or the pleasures of a heavy night under double-reefed canvas, with decks afloat and a leaky skylight, while the crash of broken crockery accentuates every extra bad lurch to leeward," said the other. "There are two sides to yachting, as there are to everything else in this world of ours."

"Can milor' grant an interview now to the gentleman who was so unfortunate as to miss him this morning?" broke in a waiter, who had approached them unnoticed from the open windows of the sitting-room.

"Oh, yes, bother the fellow!" ejaculated Ravenscourt. "I wonder what the dickens the man wants!" he added, as the waiter retired. "He called this morning, so they

tell me, and said something about important business. I suppose I'd better see him and get it over. I expect he's mistaken me for somebody else, or wants an order for ship's stores, or something. Don't you trouble to move, Willie; I shall be back in a minute."

But Lord Ravenscourt's prognostications as to his visitor's business were incorrect. That interview was destined to be of a considerably more interesting nature than he expected.

From his position on the balcony Escott was unable to see into the room, but he heard the door opened and the visitor ushered in. For a few minutes the conversation that ensued was all but inaudible to his ears, but presently the voices grew louder, and in that of his friend he thought he could detect a tone of anger, although the words were still undistinguishable.

Then he heard Lord Ravenscourt utter an exclamation of horror and dismay. "Good God!" he cried. "The man is mad! Escott, come here; I want you."

Our friend rose hurriedly from his chair and entered the room.

The two men were face to face in the centre of the apartment. The visitor's back was turned towards the window through which Escott stepped, but his attitude was

that of preparation for resistance to personal violence—an attitude which was not without warrant, to judge from the gleam in Lord Ravenscourt's eyes, and the repressed fury apparent in every feature of his powerful, handsome face.

"Pshaw!" ejaculated the latter, after a momentary pause. "There's not much credit in losing one's temper with a lunatic. The fellow's insane, that's about the hang of it. Look here, Willie, this individual—whose name, by the way, I recognise as that of an offensive persecutor by his attentions of the lady who is about to become my wife—this *gentleman* is good enough to intrude on my private affairs, and to protest against the marriage on the ground that—by the Lord! I can't bring myself to repeat his insolence."

"On the ground that Madame Francese already possesses a husband, and is, consequently, hardly in a position to enjoy the advantages of an alliance with Lord Ravenscourt," interpolated Thomas Atherton—for the mysterious visitor was none other than our old acquaintance. "Mr. Escott, I believe?" he added, turning to the new-comer.

Their eyes met, and although no sign of recognition was discernible on the speaker's countenance, it was unquestionably other-

wise with the man who encountered his gaze.

Escott's face was the face of one to whose startled sight an unexpected gulf of danger yawning at his very feet lies suddenly revealed. He stood speechless, petrified under the spell of some deadly, paralysing fear. Cecil, whose entire attention was concentrated on the man before him, failed to notice his friend's perturbation, but Atherton noted it with an amused sneer on his dark features, mingled with an expression of some slight astonishment.

"Listen to me, Lord Ravenscourt," he said. "You mistake my motives altogether. I am here to prevent your being sacrificed to a disgraceful fraud. Certain information has come to my knowledge which renders it incumbent on me to do so—as it is incumbent on any man, deserving of the name, to attempt to rescue a fellow-creature who, blind to the existence of his danger, is about to take the fatal step which will plunge him into an abyss of shame and misery. Do you think you will frighten me by your unreasoning anger? Is the surgeon, think you, deterred from completing a necessary operation by the patient's cry of pain? Listen to me, I say! You will be glad you did so an hour hence. This Marie Francese—this woman

you contemplate making Lady Ravenscourt —you may possibly not be aware of it, but her real name is Marie Ffrench."

Cecil bowed with ironical courtesy. "The future Lady Ravenscourt has made me perfectly acquainted with all the details of the past," he said. "I really think, Mr. Atherton, you might have spared yourself all the trouble that your humanitarian motives have imposed on you. If that is the 'certain information' you alluded to, I do not really think you need pursue the subject further. I am quite aware that Madame Francese's real name is Ffrench. I also happen to know that her first husband died some eight or nine years ago."

Short as was the time occupied by the foregoing speech, it had been sufficient to enable William Escott to regain by a supreme effort of will something of his wonted self-command. The mention of the name he seemed to dread above all others—the identification of the woman who was the object of Cecil's love with the deserted daughter of Mr. John Washington Simmonds—this fresh and terrible complication of his late troubles, had perhaps added to the pallor of his cheek; but, on the other hand, it had brought to his features an expression of fixed, determined resolve, and to his bearing an air of quiet

calm. Alas for Cecil Ravenscourt! alas for gentle, trusting Lucy Escott! there is no more steadfast, quiet calm than that of despair.

As his friend ceased speaking, the dramatist stepped forward. "I think, Cecil," he said, "this discussion may very well end at this point. Mr. Atherton's motives may quite possibly be beyond reproach; but from what you say, he has evidently got hold of half the truth only—a proportion which one has often been told is more dangerous than none at all. From what I have just heard I think I can give you privately full corroboration as to the death of Madame Francese's first husband."

Atherton gave a little scornful laugh. "I am sure," he said, with a bitter sneer, "Lord Ravenscourt should feel deeply indebted to your entirely disinterested suggestion—how disinterested he may possibly be able to judge later on. Look here, Lord Ravenscourt; you were good enough a little time ago to insinuate that these disclosures were due to the rejection of my attentions to Mrs. Ffrench—to call her by her own name. That remark was probably based on your knowledge of the fact that on the occasion of my calling at her house a week or so ago I was refused admittance. It might have

been better for you, and certainly better for her, if the lady had consented to see me on that occasion. My call was for the purpose of telling her what I am going to tell you now. Her husband, Mr. William Ffrench, is *not* dead. On the contrary, he is alive and well, and can be produced for your inspection at a moment's notice."

There was no mistaking the ring of confidence in the man's voice; its tones carried conviction with them. Lord Ravenscourt's handsome, deeply bronzed face plainly betrayed the effect of this last speech, while an expression of startled surprise once more crossed Escott's pale features.

"Heaven help me! It may be true—she may have been deceived," the former muttered to himself. Then he drew himself up to his full height and steadied himself for the coming blow. "Now, Mr. Atherton," he said firmly, "we'll come to the point straight, if you please. Be good enough to remember that if you are deceiving me you shall answer to me for it with your life. You assert you are actually in a position to produce this man Ffrench."

"Threats are needless," was the reply. "No man could ever accuse me of cowardice. Yes, I *can* produce William Ffrench."

"How soon?"

"*Now.*"

"Produce him, then."

"He stands beside you. *That man is William Ffrench.*"

Lord Ravenscourt gave vent to a grim, short laugh. "*That man?*" he said. "I thought I had to deal with a madman from the first, though I confess you frightened me for a moment. He? That is Mr. William Escott, my most intimate friend and my cousin's husband."

"He may be all that, Lord Ravenscourt, but he is Mr. William Ffrench, nevertheless."

Cecil turned to the dramatist with a shrug of the shoulder. "I know it is too ridiculous, Willie," he began, "but in these days if a fool requires proof that black isn't white, he is supposed to be entitled to it—good heavens! man, what is the matter with you?" he broke off, as that white look of mingled misery, curiosity, and desperate resolve—the look which a week ago Lucy had found so inexplicable—met his startled eyes. "Do you know this fellow?" Then as Escott still remained silent, Lord Ravenscourt actually shook him in his wild impatience. "Man alive!" he cried, "have you lost your speech? Say something, can't you? There isn't, surely, much difficulty in giving denial to such a silly lie as this."

If his friend's reception of Atherton's charge appeared to Cecil utterly incomprehensible, the answer to this appeal increased his bewilderment a hundredfold. It was the same he had given to the American on the occasion of that individual's first visit to Cheshunt House.

"I deny nothing," he said in a low, sad voice that struck a deadly chill to Ravenscourt's heart—"I deny nothing, and I admit nothing. Let him give his proofs if he can."

For a moment Cecil stood aghast in horror; then the man's inherent loyalty—the loyalty due to an old friend—asserted itself. He calmed his excitement by a powerful effort and faced Atherton again. "You hear what Mr. Escott says," he exclaimed. "I quite agree with his views. This is too serious a matter for mere assertion or denial to carry any weight. If you have any proofs of your incredible accusation you had better produce them. I ask you how you have managed to identify this gentleman with the William Ffrench whose death was announced in the London newspapers some eight or nine years ago."

As he spoke, he looked from the man before him into the eyes of his old friend, and wondered, even as Lucy Escott had won-

dered, to see that unmistakable expression of keenest curiosity gradually predominate over all else.

Thomas Atherton's face bore a confident, triumphant smile. "I must confess," he said, with affected deprecation, "that I am totally unable to personally identify Mr. Ffrench—or Escott, as he prefers to call himself—but the proof of my assertion will be altogether unimpeachable, notwithstanding. Allow me to shortly summarise the case. Mr. William Ffrench, then a rising young journalist in New York, went through the marriage ceremony with Marie Simmonds, the daughter of an old acquaintance of mine, some ten years ago. That fact I take to be undisputed, as is also the fact that the lady in question has been for some years past known as Madame Francese. Mr. Ffrench apparently tired somewhat of his bride, for at the end of about ten months he left her on the excuse of some professional call which would necessitate a somewhat prolonged absence. Mr. Ffrench was next heard of in connection with the celebrated *May Queen* collision, of which terrible disaster he had the good fortune to be the sole survivor. He went to Melbourne in the steamer by which he was rescued, and determining to settle in England and to cut himself at the same time adrift from all

former ties, he caused announcements of his death to be circulated in the English newspapers, manufacturing spurious proofs of his decease which he cunningly contrived should reach those most interested in his fate. He then commenced a fresh and, as it proved, successful career under the name of *Escott*."

"Rubbish!" exclaimed Lord Ravenscourt, tersely. "If your story were true, how comes it that Madame Francese never recognised the husband who had deserted her and discovered the fraud that had been perpetrated? I know for a fact that the lady in question met Mr. Escott in society on at all events one occasion, and she has travelled for the past week in his companionship and that of my cousin. Do you venture to suggest that he could have succeeded under such circumstances in concealing his identity?"

"I am very far from suggesting any such thing," was the reply.

Cecil's face set savagely. "Have a care, Mr. Atherton," he hissed out through his set teeth. "I have borne a good deal quietly enough, but if you dare to traduce the character of that lady by such a hideous insinuation——"

The other drew himself up and faced his antagonist unflinchingly. "I told you before, my lord," he said, "that I am not to be de-

terred by any threats of your vengeance from doing what I feel to be my duty in this matter. If you do not like the alternative of the idea of so high a prospective alliance being a temptation to silence, you are at liberty to accept the one you have designated as so utterly improbable. Your choice on the subject is nothing to me. I can prove that your friend is Mr. William Ffrench *by the indisputable proof of his own confession in his own handwriting.* Be good enough to read this. I trust in your honour to restore it only to its rightful owner." And placing a sheet of notepaper in Lord Ravenscourt's hand, Mr. Atherton retired a step or two to watch that gentleman's discomfiture, with a malignant smile that a devil might have envied.

Cecil glanced at the paper, and a look of profound bewilderment overspread his features. "This is a most extraordinary document," he said. "Am I at liberty to read it out?"

"Certainly," was the reply.

He read as follows :—

"The work entrusted to me is accomplished. I claim immunity from future tasks, under rule 39, in compliance with the terms of which I beg to advise you that I intend residing in England under the name of William Escott.

"(Signed) WILLIAM FFRENCH."

As he heard the contents of the letter the

expression on the dramatist's features underwent a sudden and, to Atherton, a somewhat startling change. For the first time since Escott's eyes had rested on that individual's countenance they were illumined by a faint gleam of hope. To add to Atherton's surprise, Lord Ravenscourt gave vent to a sigh of relief.

"I'm afraid you've lit on a mare's nest, my good sir," he remarked, quietly folding up the letter as a preliminary to handing it back. "Wherever you got it from, I can vouch for it that this document is a most clumsy forgery. *It is not in Mr. Escott's handwriting at all.* Your proof is not worth the paper it is written on," and Ravenscourt held it out for Atherton's acceptance.

If ever disappointed malignity gleamed in helpless ferocity out of any human being's eyes, it did so now from those of the individual thus addressed. He made a gesture of negation and incredulity. "Such an assertion is easy enough to make," he began, "but——"

"Pshaw!" broke in the other. "Argument on such a point is useless. I myself and fifty others could go into the witness-box and swear to the point. Here, take your rubbish, and give your sense of duty a chance in some other direction."

But Lord Ravenscourt's mental equilibrium was destined to receive another shock that afternoon, and that from a quarter he least anticipated. As Atherton stretched out his hand to seize the proffered document, William Escott made a step forward. "Stop, Cecil," he exclaimed. "I must trouble you to give *me* that letter."

Ravenscourt looked at his friend in some astonishment. "My dear fellow," he said, "I am sorry to disoblige you, but I can't possibly do that. You forget this philanthropic gentleman's words, when he entrusted this letter to my hands, bound me, by implication at all events, to restore it to him."

"The words he used were, 'its rightful owner.'"

"Well, that is practically the same thing. I cannot allow a quibble in a matter of honour."

"It is no quibble, Cecil; I claim that letter as *my* property."

It was Atherton's turn to be astonished now. "You claim it as *your* property?" he exclaimed. "And pray on what grounds?"

"You shall hear," was the reply. "Is there no address on that note, Cecil?"

Ravenscourt once more opened it, and inspected it closely. "Yes," he said, after a short pause, "it is addressed at the bottom

of the page to *The Supreme Council of the N—— Brotherhood.* What the deuce are you driving at, Willie?"

"You will see in a moment. Will you be good enough to ask this gentleman whether he is a member of the body to whom that letter is addressed?"

Atherton started, and with the expression of baffled hate in his eyes, there mingled the shadow of an undefined dread. "I a member of an infernal secret society?" he said hurriedly. "Good heavens! no, certainly not."

"Then as the letter is apparently addressed to some such body," remarked Escott, "it certainly cannot be said to belong to you."

"Well, my dear Willie, if it comes to that, it can't be yours either. And as this man gave it to me, as far as I can see, I am in duty bound to hand it back to him. After all, what does it matter?" asked Cecil.

"Stop, please," was the reply; and though the dramatist's face was now white to the very lips, there was no tremor in the quiet, self-possessed tones of his voice, no relaxation in the look of steady resolution on his features. "Stop! there are *two* people who may lay claim to a letter. The person to whom it is addressed——"

"*Or the writer,*" broke in Atherton triumphantly, as Escott's purpose dawned on

him. He would have his revenge then, after all.

Escott glanced at the speaker with a strange smile on his lips. "Or the writer," he assented calmly. "Once more," he said to Cecil, "I claim that letter as my property."

Lord Ravenscourt recoiled in horrified consternation. "You must be out of your senses, man," he cried. "Do you know what you are saying?"

The ring of unendurable pain in his voice, the look of agony in his eyes, made even the man who had come there to wreck his happiness wince. Escott's white, determined face grew whiter still, but he bowed his head in grave assent.

His friend came close to him, and put his arm on his shoulder. "My God! Willie," he said in a hoarse whisper, "think what it means—Marie, Lucy, myself—oh! it is impossible. See here," and he held the letter out before him, "there shall be no subterfuge, no double dealing. If you *did* write this, you confess this man's tale is true, and acknowledge yourself to be the villain who has wrecked three lives. You—my old friend—you cannot, you *dare* not in the face of Heaven say those words, and take that letter from my hand."

The passion in his voice would have moved the pity of a Caligula; but Escott's set, determined face seemed carved in stone; his resolve was taken, for good or for evil. He took the letter from between Cecil Ravenscourt's fingers.

"*I wrote it,*" he said quietly and firmly.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT BAY.

Could Lavater or any other student of physiognomy have been present in the spirit at this juncture of our story, he would undoubtedly have found much to interest him in the contrasting expressions on the faces of the three men. That on William Escott's features, as he carefully folded up the prize he had obtained, at what appeared so fearful a cost, and placed it securely in an inner pocket of his coat, spoke in a language plain as speech of the most heart-felt relief, of unexpected deliverance from a long-endured burden. The change from the pained, resolute look of a few short moments before was both startling and incomprehensible. A glad triumph shone in his eyes, the colour had returned to his face, the stern, set mouth relaxed into a smile. He seemed a different man. Atherton gazed on him in blank astonishment. Here was indeed a strange ally come forward to prove his case for him at the moment when he feared the game was lost—and to prove it, too, at the expense of

friends, reputation, and happiness, while the very sacrifice he had consummated seemed to fill his soul with delight. Why should the man joy in the self-exposure of his own villainy? It could not be that he should deem the mere possession of that letter, now that its contents were known, worthy of such purchase-money as that. That would indeed be a dear bargain. What, in the name of all the imps in Hades, could it mean? It had won Atherton his game, apparently; but the mystery of the thing tinged his victory with apprehension, and the trite old quotation, *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*, recurred to his mind. Bah! What could it matter? He had another weapon in reserve still.

As for Lord Ravenscourt, he stood for a moment or two absolutely speechless with horror, gazing at the traitorous friend—the almost brother—who had dealt the fatal blow to all his cherished hopes of happiness. God! how he had loved that man! And now——

The look in Escott's eyes, the smile on his lips, turned Cecil's horror into fury. "You villain!" he said. "You shall answer to me for this with the last drop of blood in your veins. My poor Lucy!" and he raised his hand to the bell-rope behind him. "She shall hear the truth now from the vile,

smiling lips of the man who has betrayed her."

William Escott arrested his movement with a word. "She knows the truth already," he said; "and so shall you, within the hour. You are welcome, as you would have been in case of need this many a year, to the last drop of blood in my veins. You might know that. By the memory of our old friendship, Cecil, have a little faith. *She* trusted me; will not you also? I tell you all will be well. This man has had his say and done his worst. I ask you now, bid him begone."

Atherton laughed sneeringly. "Allow me to congratulate you, Mr. Ffrench or Escott—whichever name you prefer—on your melodramatic power. Your appeal might have its effect on the stage, but you must really consider Lord Ravenscourt in the light of a besotted fool if you imagine it will have a similar influence in real life. I fancy my proofs and your own confession must have convinced even so old a friend of the truth of my accusations."

But on Cecil Ravenscourt's ears this speech fell unnoticed. His eyes were looking into those of his friend with a scrutiny the intensity of which left him blind to all outside influences. Escott met that gaze firmly and affectionately.

At last Cecil spoke, and his voice sounded strange and weary. "I *will* trust you, Willie," he said. "Forgive me if I have wronged you in my haste. Mr. Atherton," he continued, turning to that individual, "I give you every credit for bona-fides in all you have stated and the proofs you have adduced. Still, I am convinced there is in Mr. Escott's hands a clue to this seeming mystery. May I ask you to leave us?"

Just in proportion to the return of the speaker's normal calm courtesy of manner, the demeanour of Mr. Thomas Atherton gathered more and more of its former malignity. Loyalty in friendship, as in aught else, was a sealed book to that gentleman, nor could he realise its actual existence. His crass mind jumped naturally to the vilest conclusions with regard to this desire for his absence, and he saw in it an intention on the part of the two men to come to some arrangement for mutual concession and silence. He would stop that at all hazards. He had one trump card left—the strongest—and it was time to play it now.

"I shall most certainly decline to do any such thing," he said. "So far I have been but the representative and mouthpiece of another—the man who was weak enough to allow

himself to be tricked and baffled a week ago by Mr. Ffrench's ingenuity—the father of the unhappy woman who calls herself Madame Francese. I am now about to take action on my own account. Allow me to say I had by no means come to the end of my unpleasant revelations or my unpleasant duties. They will render publicity utterly unavoidable. You were about to ring the bell, Lord Ravenscourt, a few minutes ago. May I ask you to do so—as it is your own room—now for me? I wish to summon the necessary police authorities for the arrest of this man Ffrench, *as the assassin of one Wilfred Sullivan.*"

If Mr. Atherton had calculated on producing startling results by the display of his final trump, he certainly had no cause for disappointment, although, perhaps, those results were hardly exactly what he anticipated. Lord Ravenscourt, staring at the speaker, recoiled for a moment in dismay, and then, reflecting that this fresh accusation was probably only part and parcel of the original mystery, of which Escott had promised him a reassuring explanation, at once pulled himself together again.

"Really, Mr. Atherton," he said, "this is 'painting the lily.' Have you proofs of the truth of this astounding assertion also?"

Atherton bowed assent. "This young Wilfred Sullivan was a connection of my own," he replied. "He was unfortunate enough to offend a powerful confederation. This man Ffrench was the agent chosen for its vengeance, and the work he speaks of in the letter he claims to have written—the work entrusted to him and duly accomplished—is nothing else than that poor lad's *murder*. No, Lord Ravenscourt, you were quite mistaken in supposing this interview had come to an end. Look at your *friend!*"

Ay, look at him, Thomas Atherton! Look at him, and shrink before that strange, transfigured face—transfigured with the lurid light of a long-denied vengeance, which gleams from those dark eyes and dilates the tall, slight figure till it seems to assume the proportions of a giant. Look at him, and wish—as you will, ere long—that you had bitten out your tongue before you had given him, in your very accusation itself, the clue to a past you fain would hide, even from your own soul.

As Atherton ceased speaking, the dramatist strode forward, and seizing his two shoulders in a grip of steel—a grip to which only intensest passion could have given such strength—shook him as a dog would shake a rat. "You have betrayed yourself," he

cried. "You villain! To know these things you *must* have been one of that accursed crew yourself. Ah! I see it all plainly enough now. Fool that I was not to have guessed it sooner! And so my secret, deadly foe was *you*, false friend and double traitor!" Then, holding his shrinking antagonist still in that iron grasp, he turned to Lord Ravenscourt, who stood gazing at him in sheer bewilderment at this fresh development.

"Cecil," he cried, "do you remember the very last conversation we had when we parted in London? How little I thought that theory would so soon be turned to practice! Vengeance for untold wrongs, the threatened happiness of wife, child—ay, and friend also—yes, the parallel is complete. See here, then!" and as Lord Ravenscourt, grasping the situation from these final words, sprang forward to hinder the last deadly insult from man to man being given and received, William Escott loosed the hold of his left hand and struck his foe once—twice—over the mouth and nostrils. "You hound!" he said, in a voice so laden with concentrated fury that it was little more than a whisper. "You Judas! who thought the brother's little fortune might well be added to the sister's dower, and to that end could scheme and plot his death or

worse, *do you know me now?*" Then he cast the other off with such violence that the man staggered and nearly fell.

If ever human face in its redundancy of every evil passion could merit classification as an under-study for that of Satan himself, it was the face of Thomas Atherton at this moment. Terror, rage, baffled malignity, and undying hate all found their expression on his livid countenance as he gathered himself together for a spring at his antagonist's throat.

Cecil Ravenscourt stepped between them. "There has been quite enough personal violence already," he said quietly. "I think, Mr. Atherton, it would have been much better if you had left us when you were requested to do so. Perhaps you will kindly go now."

He spoke to unheeding ears. After one instinctive but unsuccessful effort to push past the intervening arm, Atherton appeared to be totally unconscious of aught else in the wide world save the presence of the man who had struck and insulted him. His wild eyes glared with mingled horror and fury on the features to whose recognition Escott's strange words had given him a new and startling clue.

"*You!*" he exclaimed. "*You?* It is

impossible. That letter was *yours*. How could—— Ah!" as a new idea seemed to strike him.

There was a momentary pause while the scoundrel evidently fought desperately to subdue the storm of fear, surprise, and disappointment that raged in chaotic confusion through his brain. Gradually the changing expressions in those evil eyes that betokened the mental conflict within concentrated themselves into a look of bitterest hatred. The man's mind was made up; he had decided on his course of action.

"There can be but one answer to a blow, whoever you may claim to be," he hissed out between his clenched teeth. "You are not now in the land where such insults are referred to the police courts. I refuse to leave this room till you have promised me the only reparation possible between gentlemen."

Escott broke out into a short, bitter laugh. "Gentlemen!" he exclaimed, with a sarcastic inflection that cut like a whip. "Well, I don't dispute your title. Do you imagine that I, too, do not realise, after all that has passed, that, wide as the world is, it is not wide enough to contain the villain that betrayed me and myself? Have no fears, Mr. Atherton, you shall have the meeting you desire, and that without delay."

His antagonist drew himself up to his full height and smiled sardonically. Now that his end was gained, he succeeded in resuming, at all events, the appearance of his former composure. "The sooner the better," he remarked shortly, in assent. "It is fortunate our views on this subject are identical. In an hour's time my friend shall be at your service for the necessary arrangements. The number of my sitting-room is 23. Your servant, Lord Ravenscourt," and, with a ceremonious bow to the dramatist, the baffled scoundrel quitted the room.

As the door closed behind him, Cecil Ravenscourt turned hastily and confronted his friend. His face betrayed the depth of anxiety that consumed him.

"Now for the promised explanation of this extraordinary affair!" he exclaimed. "You appealed to me in the name of our old friendship to trust you in the face of all appearances, and I did so. But there is a limit to everything, and I can wait no longer. You have been charged on evidence which you yourself seemed anxious to corroborate—incomprehensibly enough—with my cousin's ruin (I say nothing of the destruction of my own hopes). As her guardian, I must demand that you clear yourself from that charge to my entire satisfaction. Otherwise,

friend or no friend, you will have to deal with me as well as with Mr. Atherton."

William Escott smiled sadly. "You will use a different tone when you know all, Cecil," he said quietly. "But sit you down, for the tale will be a long one. I often think my story would turn into a strong drama if I only dared to use it for that purpose. You shall judge of it for yourself. Listen to me, and imagine I am going to tell you the plot of a projected piece—as I have often done before, time out of mind."

CHAPTER IX.

A PROJECTED DRAMA.

"WELL, then, to begin with," said the dramatist, "the action of the new play (we will call the title of it — let me see — yes, 'In Crime's Disguise' will do well enough) —the action of the new play opens in New York. My hero, Wilfred Sullivan, is a young fellow, an orphan, of two or three and twenty, of small but sufficient independent means, and a general favourite in society. In a word, he is a gentleman by birth, instincts, and surroundings. Thanks, however, to the influence of early associations, he is thoroughly permeated with a feeling of intense patriotism with regard to the land of his ancestors, for, as his name will suggest, he is of Irish descent. Every wail of woe, every cry of injustice from that unhappy country, finds an echo in his bosom. He is ill-informed, and, like many others, takes party assertion for gospel, exaggeration for truth, and believes Ireland to be the downtrodden, tortured victim of a fiendish op-

pressor that those who were his earliest mentors represented her to be.

"So opinionated is he on this one subject that he is deaf to the warnings and entreaties of his only surviving relative—a dearly loved and somewhat delicate sister, but lately married to an Irish-American of some means and position, to whom his companionship with certain compatriots of dangerous reputation is a source of anxiety. Boyishly impulsive, he joins a secret society whose aim is professedly to aid in obtaining the freedom of his country from the bonds of her tyrant. That is the one fatal mistake of his life.

"The peculiarity of the N—— Brotherhood and the chief secret of its tremendous power, is the fact that all its members, with the exception of the Supreme Council and a few necessary subordinate officials, are divided up into little working sections of six or eight, to which limited circle all knowledge of the identity of fellow-workers is confined, while all are individually forbidden, under the severest penalties, to reveal to even their nearest and dearest the fact of their membership. Thus brother and brother, father and son, if they do not chance to belong to the same section, may each pass their lives in absolute ignorance of the fact that the other

has also taken the oaths to which he himself is pledged. In a word, to every individual member of the ordinary grade the N—— Brotherhood is limited to the tiny circle of his own section, although he is aware that the name-roll of the society numbers many thousands, and is known alone in its entirety to the Supreme Council, as to whose composition he is, of course, unable even to make the wildest guess. Communication between the Council and the members is made through the medium of sub-officers, of which each section possesses one, but who knows no more of any section other than his own than does his most newly joined subordinate. Do you follow me, Cecil? I would not have gone into such minute details but that they were necessary for a true grasp of the situations that ensue. Now let us get on.

"It had never occurred to the wretched lad—for he is little more when the action of the drama commences—that the ways of the Brotherhood might lie through deeds as dark and treacherous as those of hell itself. The business of the section to which he was attached had so far been limited to such innocent work as the organisation of political meetings, the publication and dissemination of appeals for funds to carry on the good

work—there was nothing to lead him to fancy for a single instant that he could ever be called upon to do more than take an open and manly part, when the time should come, in the struggle for freedom, and, if necessary, to die in the cause which he had espoused.

"One terrible night, however, on his return from a dance or some such social function, he finds on his table—by whom placed there he is unable to discover—a letter from the Supreme Council, informing him that the assassination of a certain person of high rank in Ireland has been solemnly decided upon, and that *he* has been selected for the execution of the dreadful task. Imagine his horror! He, a gentleman of refined tastes, an honourable man, suddenly called upon to be the perpetrator of a crime so cowardly, so utterly abhorrent to his nature—he, a secret assassin! The mere idea seems too revolting for even an instant's consideration. And yet his own death is the alternative; for death, he knows, is the penalty for disobedience to a decree of the Supreme Council. It is a dramatic situation, Cecil; what do you think of it?"

If breathless interest on the part of his auditor was to be considered a compliment, William Escott must have felt flattered.

Lord Ravenscourt made no reply in words, but simply signed to the dramatist with an impatient gesture to proceed.

"As you may imagine," continued Escott, "any fate would be considered preferable to the carrying out of such a diabolical mandate as my poor hero has received. Sooner than that he braves the terrors of the doom he knows will be pronounced against him and seeks temporary safety in flight.

"The next few months of the poor wretch's life are one never-ending struggle to evade the unknown pursuer he knows full well will be despatched on his trail. His brain is unceasingly racked to devise some fresh stratagem of deception, some new, hourly ruse, some daily twist and double that may cheat the vengeance on his track. Every face is viewed with suspicion; for, remember, beyond the narrow limit of his own little section of the Brotherhood, he knows not who may or may not be among the pack that seek his death. Every man he sees may, for all he knows, be the appointed agent for the infliction of the penalty he has incurred; every moment may see its execution. Try and imagine it, Cecil, if you can. Hunted by an invisible pursuer; waiting for his death-wound from unseen or unsuspected hands, like a blind man attacked

by a relentless foe, and wondering where and when he shall feel the bite of the cold steel; crawling through the world like some noisome reptile; striving each day to find a more secure hiding-place in some remote hole or corner; snatching brief slumbers here and there, through the long, dreadful nights—slumbers which hideous dreams and terrified awakings render more fearful even than his waking hours; no friend that he dare trust, no glance that he dare meet, no rest, no pause—O God, how vividly I can picture it to myself! They say few men have been able to endure those tortures of imagination long. Before many months, if they succeed in eluding the chase so long, they anticipate their certain doom, and end the horrible uncertainty with their own hands."

He paused for a moment and wiped his brow, on which the cold drops were standing. Nor was the impassioned fervour with which the dramatist depicted the ceaseless terrors of the poor wretch he was describing, without its effect on his listener. Lord Ravenscourt shuddered as he heard, and hoarsely whispered to him to proceed.

"I will bring you as rapidly as possible to the second situation of the play," Escott went on. "A month or so later, in the course of that ceaseless flight from spot to

spot, he finds himself a passenger on the steamer *May Queen*, bound from San Francisco to Australia. By dint of the daily employment of every conceivable ruse and ingenious stratagem he must, as he fancies, have baffled his pursuers, and his hopes begin to rise as he pictures his destination as a haven of rest, where he may lose himself among the busy denizens of a new world.

"Among the few passengers on board the *May Queen* is one young fellow of about his own age, a journalist named William Ffrench, on his way to Melbourne, with whom my hero gets on very friendly terms. He has hardly ventured to converse with any human being since the commencement of his flight from New York, and his new acquaintance is clever, well-informed, and amusing. The journalist is somewhat impecunious, after the manner of his profession, and a timely act of assistance (where the main feature is an I O U, to be redeemed on arrival) on the occasion of a somewhat disastrous bet with a 'Frisco 'sport' in the card-room cements the friendship.

"The voyage, however, comes to a terrible conclusion. There is a fearful disaster at sea, when the *May Queen* is only a week out from San Francisco—a collision where neither vessel lives more than a few minutes

—and my hero finds himself in a small open boat, tossing on the vast, trackless bosom of the Pacific, one of the only two survivors of that awful scene. His companion—the only passenger who, like himself, had been on deck at the moment of collision—is his new acquaintance, William Ffrench.

"Days of fearful and protracted suffering from heat, hunger, and thirst supervene, and both the poor, hapless wretches are brought down so low that death would have felt a happy release. No drop of rain has fallen to moisten their parched, cracked lips; no succouring sail has broken the dreary line of the horizon, to cheer their hopeless watch. At last, one afternoon young Sullivan is awakened from a sleep in the stern-sheets of their little craft—a sleep born of exhaustion and despair—by the sudden shock of a falling body. It is time indeed for him to wake, for he is roused from his lethargy only to find himself engaged in a life and death struggle with his fellow-sufferer, who, armed with a heavy knife, has crept silently aft, but who, fortunately for my hero, tripping in his weakness over the last thwart he had to cross, has woke him by the fall.

"The struggle does not last long. Both are very, very weak, and a sudden lurch of the little boat precipitates the would-be

assassin over the side. He sinks like a stone.

"Utterly unable to account for this sudden and would-be murderous attack of his late companion, except on the supposition that the extremity of the latter's sufferings had turned his brain, Wilfred Sullivan lies panting and exhausted in the stern-sheets, when his eye lights on a folded slip of paper at the bottom of the boat, where it has fallen from his antagonist during that frantic, bewildering struggle. After a minute or two he has regained sufficient strength to crawl towards it and to open it. Imagine his horror when he sees that that little slip of paper is *his death warrant*, addressed to the man whom he had grown to look on as a friend—the man who, in the madness engendered by his terrible privations (as he thought), had attacked him with such blind ferocity, but who—so he reads there—had been appointed as his executioner by the Brotherhood. Merciful God! do its terrible powers stretch away thus out into the solitudes of mid-ocean? Is he *never* to be free again? Is there, then, no single spot on the habitable globe where he can lay his weary head in rest and peace? The blow of this discovery is heavy enough to dwarf his present sufferings into insignificance. His very soul sickens within him. What use

was it to dream of happier days amongst strangers in that far-off land, while even in the vast solitudes of the mighty ocean the vengeance of the Brotherhood can haunt and strike him down? What use to struggle on longer in that pain and thirst and hunger? It would be so much labour lost. How cool and refreshing the green water looked alongside! How delightful it would be just to let himself sink, sink down into the fathomless depths beneath him, with his weary, hot eyes closed, and his aching limbs folded, like a tired child that falls so gently asleep on its mother's soft breast! It would all be finished and done with then—all the never-ceasing suspicion, the heart-gnawing anxiety, the——

"Then he turns and sees that succour is at hand; sees the smoke from the funnels of an approaching steamer; sees that the frail craft which bears him lies almost in her track, and that his rescue is only a matter of an hour or so.

"Bah! what use is succour to him? To be rescued from starvation or a watery grave to him means merely to be again delivered over to the terrors of that hideous man-hunt. Surely the soft, cool embrace of those clear green depths would be a far preferable fate to that. Yes, he will give up the game; there

is nothing to be gained by fighting against the inevitable. One plunge and he will be quit of the weary world where life for him can be nothing but one never-ending round of torturing anxiety; just the few moments of pain while the instinctive struggle of physical life against extinction lasts, and then —freedom and forgetfulness. He rises and prepares for that fatal leap.

"Stay! A thought strikes him. He knows that one of the rules of the Brotherhood provides that once a member has carried through a task involving a question of life or death (though he himself had always, before his eyes were opened to the truth, believed such tasks could only lie within the bounds of an honourable if dangerous patriotism), he can claim immunity from any further calls upon him by the society. Suppose he were to take on himself the cloak of another's name, the name of his would-be assassin—suppose that if, when rescued, he is not Wilfred Sullivan, but *William Ffrench*, the emissary of the Brotherhood—what then? As the idea occurs to him he staggers and sinks down on the afterthwart, confused and bewildered by the light it flashes over the darkness of his despair; for it means life and safety, and life under such conditions is still dear to him.

"Then he tries to weigh the question

fairly. True, he will have for the rest of his life to accept all the unknown burdens of the individuality he has assumed, to stand sponsor to an unknown past. What liabilities, what ties, what sins he may be taking on his shoulders, he has no means of even guessing. This, of course, he does know—that by some four or five of his fellow-men, at all events, he must perforce be credited with the deed of blood on which he is to found his claim for future exemption from similar tasks. Still, he can obviate much of these unpleasant possibilities by obtaining permission from the Supreme Council to reside in other countries under another name. They will surely grant his application, considering the dangers he is supposed to have run in their service, and what can only be viewed as a natural desire to hide the identity of an assassin under the veil of a new life in a new land. He will make his way to England and write to the Supreme Council from there. He has a specimen of the dead man's handwriting on that I O U in his pocket. It is, after all, but a small risk to put against the possible gain. Great Heaven! what a gain it would be! What a paradise such a promise of peace and rest would appear to a poor, weary, hunted wretch! Can you wonder, Cecil, that he should not hesi-

tate to accept the chance of escape thus offered to him?

"No; the steamer rescues the sole survivor of the ill-fated *May Queen*—and his name is WILLIAM FFRENCH. Situation number two! Not a bad plot, is it?"

To the strength of the conflicting emotions that ran riot in his breast, Cecil Ravenscourt's features had, during the foregoing recital, borne ample testimony. Surprise, horror, profoundest pity, and finally the most intense relief had in rapid succession been depicted on his countenance. As William Escott paused in that tale of undeserved misfortune, and, with the old, sad smile still on his lips, waited for a reply, his hearer could restrain himself no longer, but, starting to his feet, seized and wrung his friend's hand in a grip that spoke more eloquently than any mere words could have done.

"Forgive me, Willie," he cried, "for doubting you even for a moment. My God! what you must have suffered!"

"So you have solved the riddle aright," said the other, as he responded to that friendly hand-clasp with equal warmth. "There was not much difficulty in doing so, once the clue was given—was there? But sit down, my dear old fellow. I haven't finished yet.

"Well, to proceed. My hero's plan suc-

ceeds, and the lapse of a few years finds him a new man. He is living in England under the name of—well, there is no need for mystery now—the name of *Escott*. He has adopted the profession of letters, and is an eminently successful journalist, novelist, dramatist—anything you will. For a year or so after his arrival in this country the fear of some chance recognition at the hands of any old acquaintance of Wilfred Sullivan's remains a pretty constant source of anxiety, although the hardships he has undergone and the adoption of moustache and beard combine to minimise the probability of such a thing, while, for a little time, also, he is by no means free from a somewhat unreasonable dread that, in spite of sundry precautions he has taken, the identity of the rescued, supposititious William Ffrench may be tracked to his own door by some friend or foe of the dead man. Remember that one of the chief penalties of his scheme is the possession of that most embarrassing of all belongings, an unknown past. The few cautious inquiries he is able to set on foot on this subject, however, result in nothing, and, little by little, his fears subside, and he is forced gradually to the conclusion that the individual he has successfully personated at the time of his rescue and in his subsequent

application to the Supreme Council must have been some friendless, obscure figure in that Western world to which he has bidden an eternal farewell.

"At last, in the course of his new existence, he meets his destined helpmate. He loves, and his love is returned. For him the entire universe contains but one woman—the woman he succeeds in winning and wearing as his wife. No words can paint his happiness now—fame, popularity, and the wealth that follows in their train are his; the companionship of wife and child (the sweetest little girl that Heaven ever sent as wedding gift to pure, true love), what more could heart of man desire?

"There comes a day that dawns as brightly as its predecessors. The warm, brilliant sunshine that glints down through the trees and flecks the lawn with moving, golden motes, brings no presage of the coming storm; the sweet, glad song of the thrush, as it runs and flits from shrub to shrub, contains no warning note to break the blow that is about to fall; that heavy tread upon the gravel path has in its sound no knell to loving hearts. It pauses at the door, there is a ring at the bell, and in a few moments for William Escott the sunlight has faded from the leaves, the birds have ceased to sing, the brightness of

his life has changed again to hopeless gloom.

"His visitor—a stranger to him—greets him by the name of William Ffrench, and the poor, horror-stricken wretch learns that the dead man he personates has a wife still living. How this supposititious personality has been traced, he knows not. As it happens, Mrs. Ffrench was married, so he now gathers, far from her home in the Western States, and her father—his visitor—now meets his supposed son-in-law for the first time—on what terms you may easily guess.

"And so we come to situation number three, Cecil, in this only too true drama of real life. My hero finds a fearful choice before him. Either he must admit the charge that is now brought against him, and, by doing so, must betray the real wife and child he loves so dearly—must leave them in the eyes of the world dishonoured and nameless—or he must reveal the truth and re-subject himself to the vengeance of the Brotherhood he has doubly deceived; must become once more the wretched, hunted victim of his youthful folly. It is a terrible alternative."

"Terrible indeed," said Lord Ravenscourt. "Great heavens, Willie, what did you do? I cannot understand how even your resources

of ingenuity could suffice to get you out of such a dilemma as that."

The dramatist smiled. Professional pride is hard to kill, and, truth to tell, his dramatic instincts had, for the moment, triumphed even over the remembrance of his present dangers.

"I will tell you," he said. "My hero demands of his visitor a few hours in which to decide definitely on his course of action, and when once more alone, he racks his brain to discover, if possible, the weak spot in his antagonist's armour of proof. Something in the man's manner and bearing induces him to think that some such spot does exist. At last the light flashes in upon him; the vulnerable point is the unexplained mystery of his visitor's unhesitating assurance of *his* identity with the dead William Ffrench. No recognition being, in the very nature of things, possible, it occurs to him that from one source only can that supposititious knowledge have been obtained—that source is the deadly secrets of the Supreme Council of the N—— Brotherhood. You have seen Sardou's 'Diplomacy,' Cecil? Yes? Then I need hardly tell you how my drama plays out. A similar trap is baited, with a similar result. My hero's visitor, after suggesting an unworthy compromise, is confronted with

an unopened cablegram from New York, and is accused of the betrayal of the Council's secrets for his own private purposes. A guilty conscience does the rest, and the would-be blackmailer hurries to take advantage of the respite and start afforded him by the destruction of the unopened telegram. That is the close of the original drama, Cecil. What has happened this afternoon is an altogether unforeseen sequel, which bids fair to become a tragedy."

Lord Ravenscourt rose to his feet. "You are right, Willie," he said. "Forgive me, old fellow, for even my momentary doubt of your honour; and then, let the dead bury their dead; the present needs all our attention. Give me the clue to the affair of this afternoon."

"That is easily done," was the reply, "and it will smooth the way of explanation to much that has gone before. Let us begin. This man Atherton calls on you, representing himself as the champion of morality and of the scoundrel I foiled a week ago, his object being, professedly, to warn you of the impossibility of your union with the woman you love. I am pretty well able to gauge the value he sets on morality. We must find some other clue to his action. Can you suggest one?"

His friend nodded assent. "Jealousy!" he said. "Marie gave me to understand that she had been pestered with his advances, even before his wife's death, when she was eking out a precarious existence by her labours as a daily governess to Mr. Atherton's little nephew, who lived with his uncle and aunt."

"She was a governess *there!*" exclaimed Escott. "By Jove! that accounts for a great deal. I thought I had seen her face somewhere, but where, I could not for the life of me remember."

"What do you mean?" asked the other.

"Listen to me," said Escott. "The light is beginning to break in on the most complicated scheme of villainy the mind of man ever dreamt of. When, in obedience to your call, I entered the room this afternoon—though this scoundrel did not recognise me, altered as I am—I should have known *him*, even if I had not heard his name. Can you guess who Thomas Atherton is?"

Cecil shook his head. "Who?" he asked.

"*My brother-in-law*," was the startling reply. "The vile husband of my dear, dead sister. I remember now to have had a fleeting glimpse of Marie's face at her house, long years ago. You may imagine

with what overwhelming consternation I heard from that villain's lips that the woman you loved was the wife of the supposed William Ffrench. She would naturally have thought herself the widow she actually is, from the announcements of Ffrench's death which I caused to be circulated for my greater security shortly after my arrival in England. Then Atherton produced that letter, the possession of which constitutes my freedom from the toils of that accursed Brotherhood. It was the one I wrote in the simulated writing of the dead man whose identity I had assumed. With *that* in my pocket I could snap my fingers at the chance of persecution in the future. It was the sponge which alone could wipe from the slate the record of the past. Forgive me, Cecil, if, to obtain it, I stabbed your true, loyal heart with what must have seemed to you the irrefragable proofs of my guilt and the destruction of your hopes. Once *that* was in my hands, I thought all danger would be at an end; for I knew I could satisfy you with the recital of my terrible tale. Even then I credited that man with being, as he asserted, merely the mouthpiece of the fellow Simmonds—the blackmailer I had foiled a week ago. The origin of their acquaintance I did not know

—nor can I guess it now, or realise how the trick I played upon him came to be detected; but from Atherton's manner I half imagined the motive that actuated him with regard to yourself. The fool betrayed himself with his own tongue. The accusation he made against me, when he saw the game was lost, opened my eyes to a fact I had never imagined, even in my wildest dreams."

"What was that?" interrupted Ravenscourt, eagerly.

"Listen! By no one but *a member of the Supreme Council* could it by any human possibility have been supposed that Wilfred Sullivan was assassinated by William Ffrench. To all the world beside his fate was an unknown one. Do you not see? The author of that hideous doom that wrecked my young life was that inhuman, traitorous scoundrel—my poor sister's husband."

"Great Heaven!" ejaculated Cecil Ravenscourt, aghast at the revelation of a cold-blooded villainy that appalled him by its horrible malignity. "But, Willie, think! What could have been his motive for such a dastardly crime? It must have been, indeed, of the strongest."

"His motive?" said Escott, with a bitter,

little laugh. "That is not far to seek. By my father's will, if either my sister or myself died without a family, his or her share of the property was to revert to the survivor. Did you not hear me tax him, when I confounded him with the revelation of my real identity, with the desire to add the brother's little fortune to the sister's dower? Nay, more. From what you say with regard to his designs on Marie, I suspect he has a double crime to answer for. The man whose money he coveted was selected for a task that must have found a climax in his death; the man whose wife he lusted for was chosen to effect the vengeance the other had provoked by his disobedience to the Council's decree. The result would in all human probability be identical in both cases. Now, Cecil, are you satisfied? Have I fulfilled my promise?"

Ravenscourt rose from his chair and put his arm affectionately on the other's shoulder. "My dear old boy," he said, "I wish I had bitten out my tongue before I spoke those harsh words to you half an hour ago. You may forgive me, but I cannot so easily forgive myself. But tell me; what about Lucy? You say she knows all?"

"All, with the exception of this afternoon's work, and of that, of course, she must be left in ignorance till the hour of peril

is over, one way or the other. I told her the story of my miserable past a few days after that man Simmonds had fled from the house in fear for his wretched life. You see, I thought the drama had been played out then, and that safety was assured. She thinks so still, poor child!"

There was a short silence, and then, "Look here, Willie," said Lord Ravenscourt, suddenly, "my nerves have had a better sort of training than yours for the kind of business we have on hand now. My life has depended many and many a time on the steadiness of my aim. Let me take the affair on my own shoulders. I shall probably make a better job of it than you, and I have Marie's wrongs to avenge, remember."

Escott laughed grimly. "Don't you remember our discussion at the Regent's, my dear Cecil?" he said. "Did I not tell you that, if occasion should arise, I should let no sentimental compunctions unnerve my arm? See here!" and, taking the letter from his pocket, he struck a match and carefully burned that silent witness to the last shred. "There!" he exclaimed. "Only that villain's life stands now between me and absolute safety; for Simmonds's mouth is stopped by the destruction of this evidence and by the knowledge that one word to the Council in New York

from either survivor of this duel would mean *his* death. This man's life alone, I say, threatens mine, the happiness of Lucy and my little Phyllis, and, perchance, that of my friend also; for, remember, it would not be easy for me now to prove in a court of law, even if I did not at once fall a victim to the Brotherhood's vengeance, my non-identity with William Ffrench. Suspicion would be cast on both Marie and myself at the very outset. We have so much at stake that our evidence would be looked askance at. She—the chance of union with a wealthy peer of the realm; and I—acquittal from the charge of a bigamous marriage. Think of it, Cecil—only the life of this Judas, who is unfit to breathe God's air. If your blood boils in your veins at the thought of Thomas Atherton's villainy to others, what must *I* feel—I, whom he has tortured, whose dear ones he threatens. No, old friend; you need not fear that *my* hand will be unnerved when he and I stand opposite one another. Now go, Cecil, and arrange matters, for earliest dawn if possible. I leave it all to you; only, remember, there must be no loophole of escape for one of us."

"If he escapes you, I swear to God he shall not escape me," muttered Lord Ravenscourt, as he quitted the room.

CHAPTER X.

WHEN ROGUES FALL OUT—

When there is a "curious" horse in the shafts, to most men it is a greater trial to the nerves to sit quiescent beside the charioteer than to play Jehu one's self, however inexperienced one may be. There is a vague sense of security in the grasp of the reins—a feeling that, at all events, it is in one's power to attempt to avert disaster—while the very excitement of a physical struggle carries with it a proportionate insensibility to danger.

It was even so with our old acquaintance, Mr. John Washington Simmonds. As that individual restlessly paced up and down sitting-room No. 23 that afternoon, awaiting the outcome of the momentous interview which Atherton had on this occasion insisted on taking upon his own shoulders, he was fain to acknowledge that his nerve was more severely tried than if he himself had been bearing an active part in the contest. He had given his companion half an hour to "settle their hash," as he termed it, and as that period of time prolonged itself into one

of twice and even three times the duration, Mr. Simmonds's anxiety and curiosity became visibly increased, his walk up and down the room became more hurried and irregular, and his watch was consulted at shorter and shorter intervals.

"What the rucktions can be keeping him so long?" he muttered uneasily. "Sure*lie* there can't be any fresh screw loose this time. Blast it all! I wish I was out of this swim. I reckon I would have been, too, if only I hadn't been as helplessly under that devil's thumb as a four months' old babby. It was just as simple as surface-mining to have waited till the young folk got safely spliced, and then to have sent 'em in a little quarterly account for lying low. But what was the use in talking? You might talk to that critter till your lower jaw hung down to your feet. Just scowled at me—that's what he did; and said he was goin' to play his own game his own way, this time. If I didn't like it, I might leave it. It wouldn't take much to settle *my* business. Just a post-card with the right address on it would be quite sufficient. Rot him! As if I didn't know that; ay, and think of it, too, every hour of the day and night. He's just the sort of devil to do it, if only out of pure, unadulterated cussedness. Wal! I keep a

smarter look out on him than he fancies; and the first sign I see of such pranks as those, I guess I shan't stand on no manner of ceremony with the gentleman's carcase. That beauty, William Ffrench, my amiable son-in-law—he's a smart one, too, he is. Wal, it was a neat game and a fair bluff, after all. I'd a precious sight sooner trust him than our friend Atherton, any day; but it's a poor look out when there's two of 'em can 'blow the gaff' on you at any moment—don't altogether tend to a sense of security, as Mr. Thomas would say. Jee-rusalem! An hour and a half! There *must* have been some upset. If that blessed lord would only put a knife into him, it would be a happy release and save me a power of worry."

But Mr. Simmonds's benevolent wishes with regard to the fate of his accomplice were not destined to fulfilment. A hurried step was heard at this moment in the corridor outside, the door was sharply swung open, and Atherton made his appearance.

One glance at that individual was sufficient to confirm Simmonds in his conjectures that the interview had been a stormy and not altogether a successful one. Atherton's coat was awry, his necktie floated airily over his left shoulder, his collar hung loose where it had been wrenched away from the stud in

Escott's nervous grip, and the traces of blood still on his face served to deepen and accentuate the expression of furious and deadly passion that clothed his livid features.

"Whew!" came in a sort of ejaculatory whistle from his astonished companion. "You don't seem to have made so much better weather of it than I did, after all. Say, this here English lord looks to have a nasty temper! It don't altogether appear as if you'd scored the game this time. Come, tell us all about it. I suppose you've paid some of that coin back with interest?" he continued, pointing to the marks of punishment on the other's countenance.

"I'll settle that bill in full at daybreak to-morrow," said Atherton, savagely. "You want an explanation? Well, you shall have one," he went on. "I owe the failure of my plans, the insult of these blows, all to the cursed hound who outwitted you a week ago, and whom I'm going to shoot through the head before many hours are over."

"Scott!" exclaimed Simmonds—and there was a tinge of triumph faintly discernible on his coarse face as he spoke. "What! son-in-law put all those marks on you? Wal, he ain't such a soft customer to tackle, after all; is he now? P'raps you'll acknowledge there was some excuse for me letting myself be

played so low down. Never mind, I shall be able to make a better show when 'time' is called for the second round."

Atherton looked at him with an evil look in his eyes. "You fool!" he said, with a sneer; "you've had your innings, and failed to score. You'll only have a dead man to try your wits on a second time."

Simmonds's face, long as it was by nature, grew longer still as he realised that his companion's revenge of necessity meant the destruction of the hopes he still entertained, since the discovery of the trick to which he had been subjected, of continuing his black-mailing projects.

"I guess you'll have to let him off a bit easier than that, at all events till you've given me another chance of bleeding him," he said, working himself up with an effort to the point of opposing the master-villain's deadly ferocity. "It would be a fool's trick to shoot the 'golden goose,' even if he does hiss at you."

Atherton glared at him for a moment, and was evidently about to resent his interference in no measured terms, but suddenly checked himself, as it occurred to him that his companion's co-operation was more than ever needful to him at this juncture, and that to show his teeth in too aggressive a fashion

might not be unattended with disastrous results to himself. An instant's reflection told him that with such a man as Simmonds, the sense of a common danger, and the necessity of a common effort for self-preservation would be more conducive to the *entente cordiale* than any attempt at personal coercion, if only he could make that common danger appear sufficiently imminent.

"Look here, Simmonds," he said, after a short pause, in a quieter tone, "you talk of the 'goose hissing,' and evidently fancy there may still be a chance left you of retrieving your mistake of a week ago. I can tell you, my friend, that your goose turns out to be a hawk with a pretty dangerous beak, and we may thank our stars if we get quit of this cursed business with our lives. As for the chance of obtaining some of these golden eggs you are so fond of talking about, you can hardly expect that, without evidence to back you up. I may as well tell you at once that the letter we set so much value upon in that respect is no longer in my possession. Even if it were, it would be of little enough use to you now."

Mr. John Washington Simmonds was one of that class of individuals whose courage rises in proportion to their detection, or fancied detection, of a falling off of that valuable

characteristic on the part of their antagonists; and the conciliatory change in Atherton's voice and manner brought the former out of the somewhat deprecatory retirement occasioned by his dreaded companion's initiatory reception of his last remark, like one of the alternating mannikins of an old-fashioned form of weather-glass.

"Dod-rot it all!" he exclaimed angrily. "You've surely not been such a flat-headed sumph as to be wheedled out of *that?* You —who couldn't find a soft side to your tongue when I got bluffed. I guess you'll just have to make it up to me some way or other, then. I don't see being done out of a pretty pile through your gassy interference—for that's what it's been all through. It all comes of your insisting on having your own way. Wal, you've had it now, and this is the result."

Atherton's eyes flashed with fury at this insolence in word and manner from one he had so long held in the bonds of a contemptuous authority; and if there had been one whit less at stake for him in the present situation, Mr. Simmonds might have found occasion then and there to rue his freedom of speech. As it was, he controlled himself by a powerful effort, and with a silent determination to seize the earliest opportunity

afforded him to take certain steps which, had he known of their contemplation, would hardly have conduced to his companion's peace of mind.

"You don't suppose I parted with that letter until it was absolutely unavoidable," he said, with a quiet firmness of tone and demeanour that was not altogether without its effect on the other. "Pull yourself together, Simmonds; this is no time for recriminations. I tell you we're in a devil of a mess, which it will take all our wits to get us out of. The fact is that there has been an unavoidable mistake, which I'll explain when there's time to think of anything but our own safety—both yours and mine, mind. We've got the wrong sow by the ear, and caught a Tartar into the bargain. There was a good deal of truth in what that cursed devil told you the other day. He took you in with a trick, but he might have carried the game out in earnest. He means doing it now, with both of us, if we don't stop him. When I found that out, I saw there was only one way of preventing it, and that was by stuffing such an insult down his throat, that if he had ordinary man's blood in his veins, he would think no more of delegating my destruction into the hands of any secret society on earth, than he would of handing them over his own

dinner to eat. Well, the brute is no coward, at all events, and we meet as soon as possible. Now the position is this: if I shoot him to-morrow—and shoot him I must, Simmonds—we are safe enough, and I'll try to make up to you for any chance you may have missed through what you are pleased to call my mismanagement, and the loss of that letter (to which, by the bye, you would find it difficult to prove a claim, after all). If, however, by any unlucky accident I should be the one to be left on the ground, it will be a poor business for you, I'm afraid, after what that young gentleman remarked about you this afternoon. Now do you see that our interests are identical, my friend?"

As the astute scoundrel evolved this cleverly-concocted mixture of truth and falsehood, he closely watched his companion's countenance, and was pleased to read on his coarse features that he had gauged the man's nature aright. He had indeed employed the right weapon to gain his desired end. The safety of Mr. Simmonds was the strongest lever he could possibly have selected to turn Mr. Simmonds's energies to aid in the due accomplishment of his now matured plans. That individual's lean, lanky face grew longer and longer with every word of Atherton's explanation of their position, until, when the

latter had finished speaking, it might have passed for an absolute phenomenon of ductility, so drawn out had it become in that short space of time.

"Can't we lessen the risk of this meeting —to you?" he said at last, in a low, hoarse whisper, and with a quick look over his shoulder, although he knew well enough they were alone.

Then Atherton knew he had his man fairly hooked, and that he might depend upon him for the due carrying out of that act of vilest treachery which he had in contemplation.

"Well, of course, you know, a man's second may do a good bit to help him when it comes to fighting," he said, and there was a studied significance in his tone, and a cruel, cunning look in the steely eyes which said far more than the mere words he uttered.

Simmonds looked at him for a moment in silence, visibly struggling the while with his better, or, to speak more truly, with his more sentimental self; for if you are unhappy enough to have any knowledge of the evil side of human nature you will know well that sentiment will often arm a scoundrel against temptation long after religion, conscience, and morality have become absolutely meaningless words to him. Very many years of

Mr. John Washington Simmonds's life had been passed among the mining communities in Nevada, and, wild, riotous, drunken, gambling communities as they were, fearing neither God, man, nor devil, one virtue still shed its light on and ruled their members with an unwritten law, and that was the love of fair-play. Credit the rough miners with every vice in the devil's catalogue if you choose, hold up righteous, civilised hands in horror at their rude justice and their blood-thirsty personal methods of settling their numberless quarrels, but when once the arbitration of the God of Battles had been invoked, and men fronted each other with their lives in their hands, the most unpopular member of the community could rest assured of being accorded "a fair field and no favour." In the rough miners' minds there was always a certain halo of sacredness surrounding a personal conflict, and any taint of treachery would have subjected the guilty party to the shortest of shrifts.

It was the faint remembrance of some such guiding principle in the days gone by, the lingering flavour of the old half-forgotten sentiment, that made Simmonds pause and hesitate. Somehow his utter rascality had never been so patent to himself as it was at this moment. But the safety of his own skin

was a very potent consideration with our friend, and his fears of that far-reaching arm of the N—— Brotherhood were so very acute, the dread of that vengeance which any disclosure of his misdeeds would inevitably evoke was so very vivid, that his hesitation only lasted for a few moments.

"What is it you want me to do?" he asked at last, making up his mind to the necessities of the situation.

Atherton glanced at him with a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. He also had come to a resolution during that short silence, a resolution to take, without the loss even of an hour, the necessary steps to rid himself of the incubus of such an accomplice, once his task had been completed. It is needless to say, however, that these intentions found no expression in speech at the present juncture.

"I tell you what you can do," he said, in reply to his companion's question; "you can make our mutual safety certain if you will keep your wits about you and do as I tell you. Now just say straight out—are you game to carry out my instructions so long as they don't involve danger to your own life or limbs? Yes? Well then, look here. Within the next three-quarters of an hour or so this Lord Ravenscourt will be here as our young friend's second to arrange all the

necessary details for our meeting in the morning. You will represent me in these preliminaries, and will meet him on my behalf. Now remember, the special conditions you are to insist on are as follows: First, the hour must be as soon after daybreak as possible; the best spot will be the sands at Nervi, which is within an easy drive, and where we are most unlikely to be disturbed. Second, the weapons must be pistols—duellers—which you and he can procure at any gunsmith's in Genoa this evening. Revolvers I won't have; you can make the excuse that they are too uncertain, even at short range. Third, the distance is to be short, say five or six paces only. They are hardly likely to object to this, as they mean business, I know, and I don't fancy this fellow Escott, or Ffrench, or whoever he is, is probably much of a shot. Fourthly, one of the seconds is to load the pistols, and the other can make his choice of them. The seconds can take the loading alternately, if more than one exchange of shots should be necessary; but mind this, you must arrange that the task of loading falls to your lot *first*. *I* will take care that Lord Ravenscourt shall have a sinecure in that respect. If there is any difficulty about this point, I fancy you will overcome it most easily by

some vague insinuation that we are doubtful about getting fair-play. It is a trump card to play against that sort of gentry; it doesn't please them, naturally, but they are too proud to stick to their point in face of it. Now, do you understand, Simmonds? In everything else you can let them have their own way."

"Wal," said the other, "I reckon I understand your instructions right enough; but how they spell safety for you is more than I can see."

Atherton smiled grimly. "I've seen you play some rather pretty sleight-of-hand tricks for an amateur, before now," he said. "This time you'll have to play one in downright earnest. I'll give you a couple of bullets to load with the first time that wouldn't hurt a jackdaw at five paces if you ram them down tight enough to crush them to powder. If you play your game properly both those pistols will be practically unloaded when they are placed in our hands; but *mine* will have something in it, when the word is given, which, though perhaps it mayn't fit the bore very tightly, will be good enough to do the business at that short distance."

It is due to Mr. John Washington Simmonds to acknowledge that, when he realised the extent of diabolical treachery

demanded of him, he was very nearly refusing point-blank to be a participator in the scheme; but the thought of the perils which he fancied surrounded him induced him, after a momentary pause, to signify his consent.

"I guess we'd be tarred, feathered, and hung a dozen times over for this in every State in the Union," he said gruffly; "but safety is safety, and I suppose it's got to be done."

"It's as much for your benefit as mine, my good fellow, after all," rejoined his companion. "Now look here; I want to write a couple of letters, in case our scheme should miscarry by any unforeseen chance. If you'll just smoke a cigar down in the billiard-room, I'll send word to you when you're wanted."

Unconcerned and easy as he strove to be, there was a shadowy something in Atherton's manner and voice as he made this last speech which at once struck the American. It flashed across him that the man who could so easily fashion himself to such a scheme of basest treachery as the one he had just propounded might just as easily turn traitor to his accomplice. What Atherton's projects were he could not even guess, but that strange tone and look decided him to be

on his guard, and he determined, if possible, to be an unsuspected witness of his actions.

As he turned towards the door, the means of carrying out this idea suddenly presented themselves to his mind. The room was a corner one of the main building of the hotel, and on two sides of it the open windows, heavily curtained, opened on to a balcony running round the house. The door of the apartment occupied a position nearly in the centre of the third wall, while a handsome, black and gold Japanese screen reached from within a few feet of the adjacent window, nearly to the middle of the fourth side of No. 23. The table stood in the centre of the room, and Simmonds's practised eye recognised at a glance the possibility of effecting an unobserved entrance no matter in what direction a sitter at the table might be facing.

"If he's so sure of his game, what the blazes does he want to start writing letters for?" the American said to himself, as he quitted the room, carefully omitting to pull the handle of the door right home behind him. "There's something darned hanky-panky about his looks and manner, and I can't afford to be all Christian confidence with that gentleman. What, if——? I reckon I'll go for a sight of what he's putting pen

to paper for, somehow. If it's all right, well and good; but if he's playing me false in any way, he'd better look to himself. I'd sooner he had forty holes in his skin than that I had one in mine."

For some minutes after the departure of his companion, Atherton paced the room in profound thought. Self-curses for his folly in getting himself into such a scrape were mingled with thoughts of vengeance on the man who had so thwarted all his plans that afternoon.

"Damn him!" he muttered to himself. "Who could have ever guessed the truth? Who could ever have imagined that this Escott-Ffrench impostor could turn out to be the young fool I thought was dead ten years ago? He must have found out who his pursuer was, and turned the tables on him in some extraordinary way. Well, it doesn't much matter how he managed to escape Marie's husband—he shan't escape me. I'm hardly the man to finger Master Wilfred's fortune, and then to have to give it up again—to say nothing of the danger I should be in if the truth became known to the Brotherhood. Yes, hang it all! I'll make a clean sweep while I'm about it and rid myself of this brute Simmonds by the same means. I don't suppose my plans for to-morrow can

possibly miscarry, but, if by any chance they were to, it would be comforting to think I should have my revenge after all. Anyhow there's nothing lost by writing to-night, while I feel in the humour for it." And, unlocking his travelling bag which stood in a corner of the sitting-room, he took out his writing-case and sat down at the table.

A white, determined face came peering through the window behind him. Inch by inch the man, whose villainous services he contemplated rewarding with such double treachery, crept along the balcony with noiseless precaution. Now he had crawled stealthily, in snake-like silence, through the open window, and had sheltered within the heavy folds of the curtain inside.

Atherton selected a pen, dipped it in the ink, looked for a moment at the ceiling in thought, and then began to write slowly and deliberately :—

"To 'Number One,'—

"I want you to bring this letter before the next meeting of the Supreme Council; the news I send you is of extreme importance as threatening the hitherto inviolable secrecy of its existence."

Did no intuitive sense of danger rise in the wretched man's heart to warn him of his deadly peril as that livid face looked over his

shoulder and read with mingled dread and blind revengeful fury the words that followed from that unhesitating, treacherous pen? Did no voice within him whisper of the sudden, terrible doom every letter brought nearer to completion as Simmonds found his worst fears realised? No, none.

The setting sun gilded the masts in the distant harbour, the lazy hum of the traffic in the street below floated gently through the open windows, and still Thomas Atherton wrote on :—

"It is my painful duty as a member of the Council to denounce, and devote to the Brotherhood's vengeance for the betrayal of its secrets—firstly, William Escott, of Cheshunt House, Hampstead, London, details of whose delinquencies I subjoin below; secondly——"

He paused, and the deadly face behind him grew more and more fixed in its desperate resolve while Simmonds's hand crept gently, silently, into his bosom and rested there. Then the faint scratching of the pen continued—

"an old subordinate official of the Council, John Washington Sim——"

Never a word more wrote Thomas Atherton. There was a bright gleam of flashing steel, and the fatal blow fell swift and straight and strong between the shoulders

down through flesh and sinew with so powerful a stroke, so deadly an aim, that the trenchant point was buried in his very heart. There was one terrible sound, half-gasp, half-sob—and then all was still.

The gilding faded from the masts, the twilight crept on darker and darker, the murmur in the streets grew fainter as the traffic waned, the gentle breeze that rustled the curtains grew chilly as the evening gathered in, and Thomas Atherton sat, with his writing-case before him on the table—dead.

CHAPTER XI.

HONEST MEN COME BY THEIR OWN.

It is a glorious Italian summer morning, and that smartest of schooner yachts, the *Almira*, is ramping along through the clear waters of the Mediterranean with every stitch of her snowy cruising canvas set before a light but steady topsail breeze. The fleet, white-winged craft, cleaving the blue water with her graceful bows and spurning it from her lee in one long, curling, glistening roll from nose to counter, opens up the lovely bay beyond the point, disclosing the bright, yellow strip of sand darkened here and there with drying nets, the pretty clustering village, and the crown of green, waving foliage that stretches away inland.

William Escott, leaning on the weather rail, is greedily drinking in the glorious, invigorating, ozone-laden air, and feasting his eyes on the ever-changing beauties of the scene around, while beside him stands Cecil Ravenscourt, eyeing him with the

sort of gratification you may see on the features of a hospitable host as he notes his favoured guest's appreciation of '74 Perrier Jouet.

At last, as Escott turns to him with a sigh of heartfelt happiness—the deeper for the trials he has passed through and left behind him for ever—"Better than dry-rotting in dusty old London, this, Willie?" he says, with a friendly hand on the dramatist's shoulder. "Or even standing to shoot or be shot at by Mr. Thomas Atherton," he added after a pause. "Well, old fellow, your drama, after all, had a more satisfactory if less artistic ending than you had designed. To tell you the truth, amply as he deserved it at our hands, I am not sorry that you were spared the necessity of putting a bullet through that scoundrel. I'm not altogether sorry either that that other scamp managed to make good his escape before I paid my visit to No. 23. From that half-written letter I found in front of the dead man, the blow was evidently struck in the cause of self-preservation."

Escott shuddered at the remembrance. "You can't be more thankful than I am, Cecil," he said, "that that wretch's blood is not on my hands. And yet, as I told you before, I should not have faltered for an instant in what I still consider would have

been my duty as well as a justifiable revenge."

Lord Ravenscourt laughed. "What an obstinate old beggar you are in defence of your pet theory," he said. "Not but what I quite agree with you, you know. I acknowledged that, I remember, the other night at the Regent's Theatre, though we little guessed then how soon we were to be put to the proof. By George! what a lot of strange experiences the past fortnight has brought to both of us. Thank God they are over and done with now, but they were sharp enough to last for a lifetime. I shall never forget the Hôtel des Quatre Nations at Genoa, or my visit to No. 23."

"You must have had a startling shock."

"Startling, indeed. I knocked at the door two or three times, and getting no answer, I walked in. It was quite dusk by that time and I could just see Atherton in the gloom, leaning back, quiet and still, in his chair. I spoke to him—I quite forget what it was I said; but, getting no answer, I stepped up close, and—well, it didn't take me long to see what had happened. Then my eye fell on the letter he had been writing. There was just light enough to read it by, and it told me pretty plainly by whose hand he had come to his death, and why. I wonder this

fellow Simmonds didn't make off with it, but I expect he was too terrified at his own act to know very well what he was about. As your name was mentioned in that scoundrel's letter, and as I thought it might be made the subject of inconvenient inquiries, I took the liberty of annexing it promptly. Then I summoned assistance."

"I am glad for Lucy's and Marie's sake they didn't think it necessary to detain us for the police investigation into the affair," said Escott.

"Well, you see I told them that I really knew next to nothing about the man, and the other fellow's flight left no doubt as to who the assassin actually was. Besides, an English 'milor' travelling in his yacht is viewed with a certain amount of veneration out here, and they knew they would have no difficulty in getting at me if it was absolutely necessary. By-the-bye, here is that letter I spoke of, Willie," continued Lord Ravenscourt, producing it from his pocket-book. "I hadn't time to give it to you in the hurry of getting on board last night, though I told you its contents. You had better destroy it."

William Escott read it over carefully. "It confirms all my suspicions," he said. "I wasn't far wrong when I cast my accusations

in his teeth yesterday." Then he tore the paper into fragments, dropped them over the side of the *Almira*, and watched them float away astern.

"The last link is broken that bound me to the past," he said, after a moment's silence. "That old life is as a dream that is fled with the night. Of that poor, hunted wretch, whose sole aim will be to hide himself in the nethermost parts of the earth, I need have no fears now. His one hope of safety is in silence. It is in *his* imaginations only that William Ffrench still lives. And Wilfred Sullivan is nothing more than a shadow in a long-forgotten past. Cecil, I am a new man. Ah! if you could only guess what it feels like, after all those years of never-ceasing, gnawing anxiety, to be free at last—free and *safe*. No need for me henceforward ever again to masquerade *in crime's disguise*. Thank God! Thank God!"

And as he spoke Lucy Escott's sweet face appeared at the head of the saloon companion and summoned them to breakfast.

THE END.

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Complete set, 3ft. long, in any colours as illustrated.. 14/-
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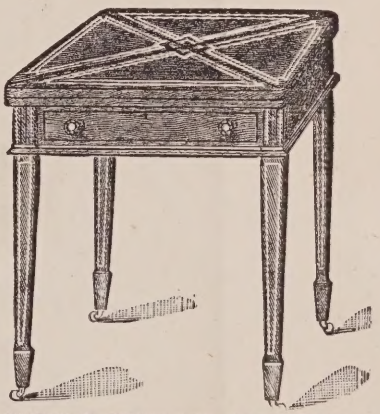

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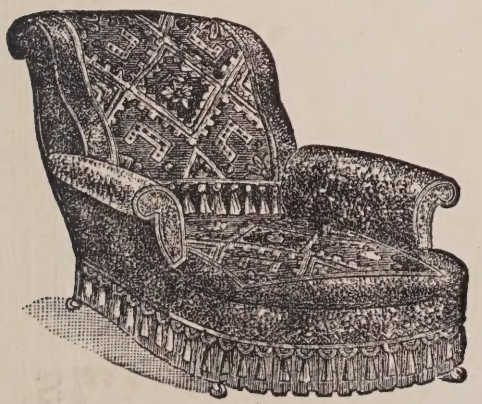

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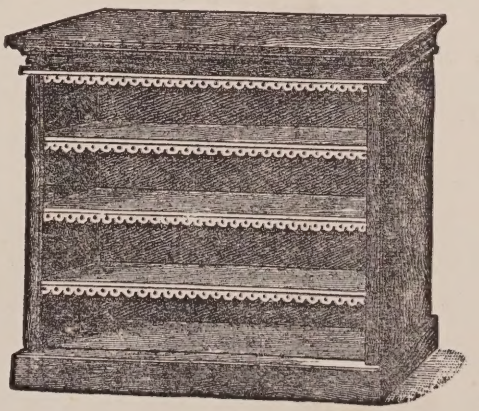

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2ft. 6in.	2ft. 9in.	3ft.	3ft. 6in. wide.
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